CHICAGO RENAISSANCE WOMEN BLACK FEMINISM IN THE CAREERS AND SONGS OF FLORENCE PRICE AND MARGARET BONDS

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In this thesis, I explore the careers and songs of Florence Price and Margaret Bonds—two African American female composers who were part of the Chicago Renaissance. Price and Bonds were members of extensive, often informal, networks of Black women that fostered creativity and forged paths to success for Black female musicians during this era. Building on the work of Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, I contend that these efforts reflect Black feminist principles of Black women working together to create supportive environments, uplift one another, and foster resistance. I further argue that Black women's agency enabled the careers of Price and Bonds and that elements of Black feminism are not only present in their professional relationships, but also in their songs. Initially, I discuss how the background of the Harlem and Chicago Renaissances and racial uplift ideology shaped these women's artistic environment. I then examine how Bonds and Price incorporated, updated, and expanded versions of these ideals in their music and careers. Drawing on the scholarship of Rae Linda Brown, Angela Davis, and Tammy L. Kernodle, I analyze Price's “Song to the Dark Virgin,” “Sympathy,” and “Don't You Tell Me No” and Bonds's “Dream Variation,” “Note on Commercial Theater,” and “No Good Man” through a Black feminist lens. I contend that although Price and Bonds depicted harsh realities of Black women's experiences, they also celebrated Black women's resistance in spite of intersectional oppression. Ultimately, analyzing Black feminism in these composer's careers and songs opens a path for further exploration of how Black women's agency can facilitate activism through art.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: RACIAL UPLIFT, BLACK RENAISSANCES, AND BLACK FEMINISM

In recent years, music scholars have developed a new appreciation for Florence Price as a prominent Black female composer. Thanks to the scholarship of the late Rae Linda Brown, many critics and academics have begun to reexamine Price's music and advocate for its inclusion in the Western canon. These developments are part of the changes necessary to diversify the repertory of Western art music, yet they also enable a reexamination of the roots of Price's success. As part of the Chicago Renaissance, Price and her fellow pianist and composer Margaret Bonds belonged to an artistic network driven by a dedicated coalition of Black women, and their accomplishments made them role models and sources of pride in their communities. However, while Price and Bonds were the public face of Black racial uplift, many of their songs reveal the complex struggles that Black women experience. Their determination to present nuanced images of Black experiences aligns with Langston Hughes's urging in his famous 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," that artists should strive for more diverse portrayals of Blackness, rather than simply polite and polished versions.[1] He declared, "We know we are beautiful. And ugly too."[2] Bonds and Price incorporated this philosophy into their songs, which explore the complicated experiences of navigating Black womanhood and struggling beneath the weight of intersectional oppression. Yet, in the process of addressing the many obstacles that Black women face, the protagonists in these songs also discover an inner strength, which they utilize to survive and resist.

[1] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994) 91–95.

[2] Hughes, 95.

By examining the art songs and careers of Price and Bonds through a Black feminist framework, this thesis argues that these composers exemplify how Black women used art to shape the development of social consciousness. Black feminist collaboration in the Chicago Renaissance created opportunities for Price and Bonds to succeed, and in turn these composers used their music to depict Black women's experiences as an important component of the journey towards collective empowerment. As a result, recognizing the significance of Black feminist models in this era creates opportunities for further explorations of how Black female initiatives have shaped (and continue to shape) artistic and social movements within their communities.

The Harlem Renaissance and Racial Uplift

Although Bonds and Price were part of the Chicago Renaissance, its predecessor, the Harlem Renaissance, had a significant impact on their lives. From roughly 1917 to 1935, the Harlem neighborhood in New York City was the center of the Black artistic community. Samuel Floyd explains that several factors facilitated the birth of Harlem as a Black cultural center—including the rise of the Black middle class in the late 19th century, the formation of the Black upper-class in the early 20th century, and the Great Migration (1916–1970).[3] This upward mobility for Black citizens, however, sparked violent backlashes across the country. As Robert Bone and Richard A. Courage explain, "The Great Migration and the Great War had destabilized American race relations by disrupting the fixed patterns of southern life and bringing unprecedented freedom and movement to the black masses. But in the war's aftermath, new boundaries were drawn and old taboos reinstated."[4] In spite of social and economic progress,

[3] Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 89:91.

[4] Robert Bone and Richard A. Courage, *The Muse in Bronzeville: African American Creative Expression in Chicago, 19321950*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 46.

Black people were still less than equal, and many white people reiterated that fact by retaliating against Black progress with violence.

Recognizing this lack of acceptance, members of artistic circles in the Black upper- and middle-classes attempted "earn" the right to be treated with respect and humanity—a mission that was instilled into generations of Black children (including Bonds and Price) as their duty to their race. The goal was racial uplift, a concept that promoted education and achievement as the key to gaining equality for Black citizens. As James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1922, "The status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions. And nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his [*sic*] status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art." [5] To accomplish this goal, several Black writers, musicians, dancers, and artists strived to "uplift the race" by creating exceptional works within a Black aesthetic. In this era, racial uplift ideology was closely tied to the promotion of Western art music, and Black musicians were specifically encouraged to become accomplished classical performers or composers.[6] This emphasis on mastering classical music was the foundation of childhood training for Price, Bonds, and many other musicians who would use their gifts to become teachers, performers, and advocates for Black communities. Although racial uplift ideology benefited many people by prioritizing education and achievement, its execution was inherently tainted by classicism and colorism, as many of its champions dismissed lower classes and people with darker skin in their efforts to assimilate into white society. Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. elaborates on how these "class tensions in the African American community" led to discrimination against

[5] Quoted in Floyd, 106.

[6] According to Floyd, "Musically, the idea was to produce extended forms such as symphonies and operas from the raw material of spirituals, ragtime, blues, and other folk genres." Ibid, 107.

popular forms of Black music.[7] Although advocates of racial uplift revered Black idioms when incorporated into art music compositions, many rejected jazz and the blues as low-class forms of entertainment. Despite their achievements and popularity, high-class Black people often dismissed artists like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith as part of an immoral and unsophisticated segment of society, which made them ineligible to contribute to Black excellence. Yet despite upper- and middle-class Black society's devotion to classical music, Ramsey points out that most Black musicians were still barred from entry into the white-run institutions that promoted Western art music.[8]

Although this strict cultural hierarchy persisted throughout the Harlem Renaissance, in later years the atmosphere began to change. Growing communities of Black artists continued traveling to big cities and bringing new influences with them. As a result, the lines between classical and vernacular music began to blur as innovative Black musicians forged a path towards embracing all aspects of their cultural heritage.

The Chicago Renaissance and Bronzeville

From about 1935 to 1950, Chicago was the new cultural center for Black artists. Although the Chicago Renaissance took place after the Harlem Renaissance, Chicago's flourishing arts scene developed alongside it. In fact, Helen Walker-Hill describes an on-going rivalry between residents of Harlem and Chicago about which city should be considered the center of the Black artistic community.[9] Like many northern cities, Chicago received a large

[7] Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., "Cosmopolitan or Provincial?: Ideology in Early Black Historiography, 1867–1940," *Black Music Research Journal*, 16 no. 1 (1996): 36.

[8] Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *The Amazing Bud Powell: Black Genius, Jazz History, and the Challenge of Bebop*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 56.

[9] Helen Walker-Hill, "Black Women Composers in Chicago: Then and Now," *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 8.

influx of Black citizens during the Great Migration and struggled through the onslaught of racial violence when white Americans resisted Black progress after World War II. As a result, Chicago leaders worked hard to help incoming Black citizens adjust to their new lives and to address race relations in the city.[10] During the Great Depression (1929–1939), many American cities began to struggle as jobs became scarce, a crisis that was particularly severe for Black communities. As a result, the artistic activity in New York declined as Black artists sought their fortunes elsewhere and Chicago rose as the next haven for Black artistry.

Bronzeville—a nickname for the South Side of Chicago, where most of the city's Black population lived—had a bustling musical community that encompassed blues, jazz, gospel, and classical music. The mother of the blues, Ma Rainey, jazz legend Louis Armstrong, gospel pioneer Thomas A. Dorsey, and classical composer Scott Joplin all played a part in Chicago's rich musical history, and when Florence Price and Margaret Bonds eventually entered that music scene, they too made a lasting impression. In addition to composing and performing in classical styles, both Price and Bonds took advantage of opportunities to engage with other genres of music in the city. Price wrote a series of theater and popular songs, and she even played the organ for silent films when she first arrived in Chicago.[11] Bonds was involved in several theater projects throughout her career, and she often engaged with African American vernacular music by utilizing jazz and blues idioms in her work. Unlike the Harlem Renaissance, which created stricter divisions between high-class and low-class music, the Chicago Renaissance allowed for more fluidity between different genres. This cross-pollination of styles also reflects the changing

[10] Bone and Courage, 40:47.

[11] Rae Linda Brown, *The Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price*, edited by Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 99.

atmosphere of the Black artistic community's interests from requesting acceptance to depicting reality.

The leaders of the Chicago Renaissance, including Richard Wright, Frank Marshall Davis, Langston Hughes, and Arna Bontemps, challenged the idealized, polished approach of the Harlem Renaissance and utilized their experiences to fight for change by embracing all aspects of Black life. Although Hughes was also part of the Harlem Renaissance, he rejected disdain for African American vernacular music. As a writer who frequently used jazz and the blues as the foundation for his poems, Hughes chastised the "Nordicized Negro intelligentsia" for dismissing these genres as lesser forms.[12] Instead of presenting Black excellence as an example of Black worthiness, Chicago leaders took a sociological approach to studying the disparities between Black and white experiences and presenting the harsh realities of these studies. By striving to capture the reality of Black lives, the Chicago Renaissance inspired artists to present more nuanced versions of their stories, which enabled future composers to embrace the complexities of their Blackness through their music.

Bonds and Price inherited this changing artistic landscape during their training as Black classical musicians. Soon, a combination of the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance and the freedoms of the Chicago Renaissance would form the foundation of their missions as composers. Eventually, Price and Bonds repurposed racial uplift and embraced a diverse network of talented Black women in Chicago to achieve their ultimate goal—establishing successful careers and building new opportunities for Black female musicians in the process.

[12] Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 94.

Florence Price and Margaret Bonds

As upper-class Black women, Florence Price and Margaret Bonds were raised with the same expectations for all ladies of their social standing—to contribute to racial uplift by becoming accomplished wives, mothers, and pillars of Black society. More fortunate Black families were expected to serve the lower classes by using their talents to educate and assist them. Black women in particular were bound to use their talents in the service of others through education, marriage, motherhood, social groups, and charity work. In fact, both Price and Bonds could have fulfilled their duty to racial uplift simply by maintaining the careers and social roles their families expected of them; instead, they decided to forge new paths by pursuing their passion for composing.

Initially, Florence Price devoted herself to her roles as an educator, wife, and mother. She was born on April 9, 1887 to an upper-class Black family in Little Rock, Arkansas. As part of her genteel upbringing, Price began learning piano from her mother and during these lessons she discovered her talents as a musician and composer. In 1906, Price earned certificates in organ performance and piano pedagogy from the New England Conservatory in Boston.[13] After graduation, she moved back in with her parents to teach at nearby Shorter College—where she met and fell in love with a lawyer named Thomas Price.[14] The couple married on September 9, 1912 and settled in Little Rock to start a family. They had two daughters, Florence Louise and Edith Cassandra, and Price dedicated herself to being a wife and mother in addition to teaching, thus juggling the expectations placed on upper-class Black women in this era.

[13] Brown, *Heart of a Woman*, 40:56.

[14] Ibid, 67.

When Price moved to Chicago in 1928, she joined a thriving Black musical community.[15] Helen Walker-Hill explains that, together, the city's significant Black population, development of Black musical genres, prominent Black newspapers, and integrated music schools created a wide range of opportunities for Black women to pursue careers in music.[16] Bethany J. Smith further describes Chicago as one of the first cities to recognize Black female composers and to organize performances that "demonstrated the creative talents of black Americans and placed them in an integral role of American music history."[17] By taking advantage of the opportunities in her new environment, Price joined a talented community of Black women who utilized their artistic talents to uplift Black female musicians throughout the Chicago Renaissance.

As a Chicago native, Margaret Bonds was raised in an environment that celebrated Black excellence and advocated for racial uplift, which shaped her future as a proud Black female composer and activist. She was born in Chicago on March 3, 1913 to musician Estella Bonds and physician Dr. Monroe Alphus Majors.[18] Bonds lived with her mother, who was a pianist, organist, music teacher, and one of the pillars of Chicago's Black artistic community. The Bonds household was a thriving cultural center for Black musicians, writers, and artists, with a constant stream of famous guests including singers Abbie Mitchell and Roland Hayes, composers Will Marion Cook, William Dawson, and Florence Price, and authors Countee Cullen and Langston

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[15] Escalating racial tensions and fear of violence was the primary reason for the family leaving Arkansas. There was a plot to lynch Price's daughter, Florence Louise, in retaliation for a white child's alleged murder by a Black man. When this plan came to light, Price and her children quickly moved to Chicago, where her husband joined them a few months later. Brown, *The Heart of a Woman*, 77.

[16] Helen Walker-Hill, *From Spirituals to Symphonies: African-American Women Composers and Their Music*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 28.

[17] Bethany J. Smith, "Renaissance, Chicago: 1935–1950," in Encyclopedia of African American Music, Vol. 3, edited by Emmett G. Price III, Tammy L. Kernodle, and Horace J. Maxile, Jr., (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2011), 828.

[18] Dr. Majors was also a political activist and author. His book *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities*, published in 1893, contains significant information about Black female composers of the nineteenth-century. Walker-Hill, *From Spirituals to Symphonies*, 145-146.

Hughes.[19] Bonds described her mother as a person with "'a collector's nose for anything that was artistic'" and she admired her mother's ability to gather what seemed like "'all the living composers of African descent'" into their home.[20]

Through her mother's connections, Bonds formed a strong foundation to nurture her musicianship. She started piano lessons early, wrote her first piece at 5 years old, and by the time she was 8, Bonds was taking lessons in her mother's workplace—the Coleridge-Taylor Music School. She joined the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM) in high school as a charter member of their Junior Music Association, and her membership gave Bonds ample opportunities to perform and earn scholarships to continue her music education.[21] Later, she expanded her studies by taking composition lessons with William Dawson and Florence Price. Walker-Hill explains that "Price's example and encouragement played an important part in Margaret's development," as Bonds began to consider pursuing a career as a Black female composer.[22] Since Bonds grew up surrounded by Black artists, including several Black women, she absorbed the communal energy of celebrating Black pride and the racial uplift ideology of striving to serve her community through her art. These experiences gave Bonds a sense of responsibility to use her music as a platform for social justice.

In Chicago, Price participated in the city's music organizations and collaborated with other musicians to promote the success and talent of Black women in music. She dove into the city's thriving music scene on April 2, 1928 when she joined a local chapter of the National

[19] Walker-Hill, *From Spirituals to Symphonies*, 145.

[20] Bone and Courage, 95.

[21] Walker-Hill, *From Spirituals to Symphonies*, 146.

[22] Ibid, 146-147.

Association of Negro Musicians (NANM).[23] This organization was founded in 1919 "to promote black classical music and to support African American composers and performers of concert music."[24] As a result, the NANM was the central hub for Black classical musicians to promote their work, organize events, and collaborate with their fellow artists. Through the NANM, Price also met Estella Bonds—in fact, Price and her daughters even spent some time living in the Bonds household where she eventually met Langston Hughes and interacted with other Black artists.[25] Price's introduction to Estella Bonds also initiated her relationship with Bonds's then-teenage daughter, Margaret. Florence Price and Margaret Bonds began as student and teacher, but as the years went by their relationship grew through their connections as Black women, performers, composers, and friends.

Price and Bonds utilized their success as composers to organize performances and break boundaries, which created a path for other Black female musicians to follow. On October 12, 1934, Bonds performed Price's *Piano Concerto in One Movement* with the Women's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago—an ensemble that reflected the growing trend of women's orchestras designed to create opportunities for women as serious performers and composers.[26] Price further transcended boundaries by becoming the first Black woman to join the Illinois Federation of Music Clubs, the Musicians Club of Women, and the Club of Women Organists.[27] Price's ability

[23] Brown, *The Heart of a Woman*, 88.

[24] Ibid, 87.

[25] Rae Linda Brown, "Lifting the Veil: The Symphonies of Florence B. Price," in *Florence Price Symphonies Nos. 1 and 3*, American Musicological Society Recent Researches in American Music Vol 66, edited by Rae Linda Brown and Wayne Shirley, (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2008), xxxi.

[26] Brown, *The Heart of a Woman*, 158.

[27] Ibid, 183.

to enter these spaces allowed her to create opportunities for more Black women to follow in her footsteps.[28]

Bonds similarly made a conscious effort to use her status as an established Black female composer to guide other Black musicians towards the path of success. In Chicago in the 1930s she opened the Allied Arts Academy— a school that taught music, art, and ballet.[29] By this point, Bonds had already achieved great success in her performing and composing career. Still, she saw the need to utilize that success to uplift the next generation of Black artists. In 1956, she created the Margaret Bonds Chamber Music Society in New York, which scholar Anna Celenza describes as an organization that "was dedicated to establishing a canon of art music by African-American composers."[30] Bonds believed in the collaborative spirit of the Black artistic community, and she actively supported racial uplift by seeking out other artists to continue the legacy of Black excellence. As a result, her efforts played a significant role in empowering the Black artistic community.

Price and Bonds were instilled with racial uplift ideology, and its various responsibilities, from a young age, which encouraged them to transcended barriers through their achievements in Western art music. Yet, they also utilized their talent to exceed the expectations of Black women's contributions to racial uplift. Not only did these women exemplify high society while raising families, but they also composed and utilized their platform as artists to create change for future generations. By acting on their desire to become composers, these women boldly forged a new path towards building a more inclusive environment for Black artists. Specifically, this

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[28] Brown, *The Heart of a Woman*, 183.

[29] Walker-Hill, *From Spirituals to Symphonies*, 150.

[30] Anna Celenza, "Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship," Special Collections Gallery, Georgetown University Library, August 30, 2016–January 24, 2017, accessed on March 23, 2020, https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/margaret-bonds-and-langston-hughes-musical-friendship.

simultaneous upholding and subversion of racial uplift allowed Bonds and Price to utilize their success to create new opportunities for Black female musicians. Their efforts reflect the power of Black women's activism and demonstrate how encouraging Black women's abilities greatly benefits society as a whole.

Black Feminism and Agency in Price's and Bonds's Music

In her landmark 1990 text *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses Black feminism as a concept that examines Black women's experiences with racism, sexism, classicism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination as valuable survival knowledge. While this term is a modern invention, Black feminist ideals can be traced back to the nineteenth-century to women like Maria W. Stewart who gave public speeches and published documents confronting political issues that subjugated (and continue to subjugate) Black women. Collins states, "Maria Stewart challenged African-American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood so prominent in her times, pointing out that race, gender, and class oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women's poverty."[31] Awareness of this multi-layered discrimination, commonly known as intersectional oppression, and its role in suppressing marginalized communities is an essential part of Black feminist thought. Still, in spite of intersectional oppression, Collins argues that Black women establish ways to resist these systems, uplift one another, and define themselves. She explains that, "Black feminism remains important because U.S. Black women constitute an oppressed group. . . As long as Black women's subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and

[31] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed."[32] She further argues that although Black women are the center of Black feminist thought, it is an inclusive and international movement that benefits society as a whole by empowering Black women to fight for themselves and other marginalized groups to achieve a more just and equitable world.

In this thesis, I argue that there is evidence of Black feminist thought in the careers and art songs of Price and Bonds. As composers of the Chicago Renaissance, these women benefited from a thriving group of Black female musicians who worked together to create opportunities for each other in the artistic world. Their connections to Black women's networks and each other gave Bonds and Price a strong sense of community and identity, which they used to resist intersectional oppression.

Many of the groups that Black women created and managed during the Chicago Renaissance match Collins's discussion of "safe spaces" as places where Black women can subvert the behavioral expectations placed on them by wider society.[33] Black women often find solace in entering these spaces, such as community organizations, household gatherings, or church meetings, where they are free to be themselves. Collins elaborates, "By advancing Black women's empowerment through self-definition, these safe spaces help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African-American institutions."[34] Tammy L. Kernodle further discusses the necessary purpose that

[32] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 22.

[33] Ibid., 101.

[34] Ibid., 100-101.

Black-women-run gatherings served for Black female artists.[35] Kernodle specifies, "It was in living rooms and at kitchen tables that black women transferred the knowledge that was key to their survival and negotiation of white and male-centered spaces."[36] Samantha Ege similarly examines how Nora Holt, Estella Bonds, and Maude George utilized their influence to create a series of "safe spaces" for Black women in Chicago, which led to significant achievements for Black female composers.[37] Both Holt and George were music critics who wrote for the *Chicago Defender*, the nation's most prominent Black newspaper, and Ege explains how they utilized the technique of naming and "crediting Black women's work" to amplify and praise these women's accomplishments. [38] Holt was also one of the cofounders of the NANM and president of its first chapter. Her role in establishing this organization not only benefited Black classical musicians, it also established a precedent of Black women serving as leaders in this organization. Ege explains, "During and after Holt's tenure, many more women (including Bonds, George, and Price) occupied leadership roles across NANM and its various branches. This increase extended the site of black women's fellowship to positions of greater institutional power."[39] Estella Bonds established yet another legendary "safe space" by, as previously mentioned, opening her home to an array of Black artists—including several talented women.[40] "Safe spaces" like these were an essential part of freeing Black women to explore their creativity and to form important

[35] Tammy L. Kernodle, "A Woman's Place: The Importance of Mary Lou Williams' Harlem Apartment," NPR, September 12, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/09/12/758070439/a-womans-place-the-importance-of -mary-lou-williams-harlem-apartment.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Samantha Ege, "Composing a Symphonist: Florence Price and the Hand of Black Women's Fellowship," *Women and Music*, 24 (2020): 7-27.

[38] Ege, "Composing a Symphonist," 12.

[39] Ibid., 13.

[40] Collins, 101.

connections to help each other through the process.[41] They ultimately allowed Black women to wield power and made room for other women to do the same.

As Collins states, the importance of friendship and passing down survival knowledge is another essential component of empowering Black women, and I contend that Price and Bonds exemplify this Black feminist strategy. Throughout this thesis, I examine how Black feminist networks allowed Price and Bonds to pursue their careers and tell Black women's stories through their songs. In Chapter 2, I discuss how Price navigated the Western art music world as a Black female composer by participating in organizations and forming collaborations that were dedicated to Black women's artistry. Through Black female friendships, Price earned significant success as a song composer, which enabled her to highlight the struggles and triumphs of Black womanhood in her music. I analyze Price's "Song to the Dark Virgin," "Sympathy," and "Don't You Tell Me No," to examine the importance individual Black female experiences in advancing Black feminist thought. In Chapter 3, I then describe the partnership between Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes to demonstrate the importance of collaborations between Black women and Black men in advancing Black feminist causes. I further discuss how Bonds and Hughes created a new version of racial uplift that honored African American vernacular music and Black women's experiences as valuable contributions to this goal. I analyze the songs "Dream Variation," "Note on Commercial Theater," and "No Good Man" to discuss how Bonds's music reflects Black feminist thought by recognizing Black female self-empowerment as an essential component for achieving the goals of racial uplift.

These examinations demonstrate the importance of Black women in the Chicago Renaissance. As a result, analyzing this time period and its music through a Black feminist lens

[41] Collins, 101.

provides deeper insight into how Black women's art and activism has facilitated change in the artistic community. Studying Price's and Bonds's work is thus ultimately part of a larger and necessary reevaluation of Black women's roles in shaping history during this era and beyond.

CHAPTER 2

FLORENCE PRICE: BLACK FEMINIST STRATEGIES FOR SURVIAL AND RESISTANCE

> *My dear Dr. Koussevitzky,*
>
> *To begin with I have two handicaps—those of sex and race. I am a woman; and I have some Negro blood in my veins.*
>
> *Knowing the worst, then, would you be good enough to hold in check the possible inclination to regard a woman's composition as long on emotionalism but short on virility and thought content;—until you shall have examined some of my work?*
>
> —Excerpt from Florence Price Letter to Serge Koussevitzky
> July 5, 1943

As a Black woman, Florence Price recognized the obstacles that stood in the way of her ambition to become a great American composer. Still, she advocated for her music by doing the unthinkable—asking a white man to judge a Black woman's music based on its merit alone. Price's letter to Koussevitzky was part of a 9-year correspondence that she initiated with the conductor to establish a place for her work in the repertory of the renowned American ensembles on the East Coast.[42] While she did not accomplish this goal in her lifetime, recent interest in her work led to a greater appreciation of Price's value and her legacy as a pioneer for Black female composers. I seek to expand these discussions of Price by applying modern, Black feminist scholarship, thus connecting her work to a broader system of Black women's resistance through art.

In this chapter, I highlight the history of Price's success as an art song composer, and analyze her songs through a Black feminist lens. I draw on the scholarship of Samantha Ege, Tammy L. Kernodle, and Rae Linda Brown to establish Price's collaboration with Black female artists and its influence on her career as an art song composer. I also draw on previous analyses

[42] Brown, *Heart of a Woman*, 188.

of Price's art songs by Brown, Shana Thomas Mashego, Bethany Jo Smith, Penelope Peters, Marquese Carter, Christine Jobson, and John Michael Cooper. Building on the work of Black feminist scholars Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis, I analyze the songs "Song to the Dark Virgin," "Sympathy," and "Don't You Tell Me No" to examine how Price portrayed Black women's sexuality, anxieties, self-definition, and subjugation. While confronting these issues, I argue that these songs defy intersectional oppression through Black feminist strategies for promoting Black women's survival and resistance.

The Legacy of Price's Songs

Price was an active participant in the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM), and through this organization she connected with several people who would help further her career—including the legendary contralto Marian Anderson whose affection for singing Price's music both in the U.S. and abroad created instant success for many of the composer's art songs.[43] According to Rae Linda Brown, "Anderson had over 50 of Price's songs in her possession, many of which were premiered by and dedicated to the diva."[44] These two women had a long-standing friendship and artistic collaboration because they were both part of an intuitive network of Black female musicians who helped each other along the path to success. Anderson performed and promoted a number of Price's songs—most notably she sang Price's arrangement of the spiritual "My Soul's Been Anchored in the Lord" for 75,000 people in her Lincoln Memorial concert on April 9, 1939. This famous event was the result of racial injustice. Anderson was engaged to sing in Washington D.C. at Howard University's request, but despite Anderson's reputation the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let her sing in their

[43] Brown, *Heart of a Woman*, 97.

[44] Ibid, 225.

venue, Constitution Hall, because she was Black. First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt protested the DAR's decision by resigning from the group and helping to organize an outdoor concert in front of the Lincoln Memorial. At this event, Anderson sang patriotic songs, arias, and spirituals in front of an expansive and integrated crowd; thus, creating a historic moment in the fight for racial equality.[45] Price and Anderson both benefited from the publicity of this concert, which drew attention to the wealth of talent and resilience among Black female artists.

In addition to her role as a pioneer among Black women composers, Price's songs are a significant part of her legacy. She composed about 100 songs in total, and although her art songs receive the most attention, she also composed musical theater songs and popular songs. Price displayed a particular affection for setting texts by renowned Black poets Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar.[46] By engaging with poets who were exploring depictions of Blackness in their work, Price created space to expand upon these ideas in her music through illustrations of Black women's experiences. This chapter focuses on three of Price's songs in particular: "Song to the Dark Virgin," "Sympathy," and "Don't You Tell Me No." In "Song to the Dark Virgin" the composer subverts stereotypes about Black bodies through a heroine who dares to confront these "controlling images" and transforms them into explorations of her sexuality.[47] "Sympathy," on the other hand, is rooted in the singer struggling to come to terms with the harsh nature of her reality—her situation remains unresolved, yet she finds the strength to bear these burdens. In contrast to these art songs, the protagonist of Price's musical theater piece "Don't You Tell Me No" is not the heroine, but a hidden aggressor. He sounds charming at first, but

[45] Susan Stamberg, "Denied a Stage, She Sang for a Nation," NPR. April 9, 2014, https://www.npr.org/2014/04/09/298760473/denied-a-stage-she-sang-for-a-nation.

[46] Brown, *The Heart of a Woman*, 221.

[47] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 10.

then his manipulative and unyielding nature begins to show as his dangerous behaviors threaten the woman he is addressing. These songs represent Price's skill as a thoughtful composer who presented Black women's experiences in a way that simultaneously expresses tragedy, trauma, and hope. By exploring both the painful and joyful qualities of life as a Black woman, Price created songs that paint a vivid picture of how these women endure in spite of their burdens.

"Song to the Dark Virgin"[48]

Anderson popularized "Song to the Dark Virgin" during one of her tours, which eventually led to G. Schirmer publishing the song in 1941. Currently, scholarship about this song reveals an enduring curiosity about the identity of the "dark virgin" and this character's role in Langston Hughes's poem and Price's music. Many scholars, including Shana Thomas Mashego and Bethany Jo Smith, suggest that the virgin is a reference to the Black Madonna (a religious image that depicts the Virgin Mary as a Black woman).[49] Smith also discusses how the poem's prominent themes of "racial shame" reveal the narrator's inability to come to terms with their Blackness, ultimately leading to their demise.[50] Penelope Peters proposes two readings: one with a male singer adoring "the dark virgin" and another with the virgin addressing herself—possibly while looking in a mirror.[51] Her first reading describes how the male observer's "attentions increase in intimacy and intensity" and eventually create "a flame that will forever consume and

[48] Price titled this piece, "Songs to the Dark Virgin," which corresponds with the title of Hughes's poem. The published score, however, lists the title as "Song to the Dark Virgin," so I have chosen to use that title in this thesis. Florence Price, "Song to the Dark Virgin," in *Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers*, compiled by Willis C. Patterson, (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Company, 1977), 98-101.

[49] Shana Thomas Mashego, "Music from the Soul of Woman: The Influence of the African American Presbyterian and Methodist Church Traditions on the Classical Compositions of Florence Price and Dorothy Rudd More," (DMA diss, University of Arizona, 2010), 29; Bethany Jo Smith, "'Song to the Dark Virgin' Race and Gender in Five Art Songs by Florence B. Price," (Master's thesis, University of Cincinnati, 2007), 90.

[50] Smith, 89.

[51] Penelope Peters, "Deep Rivers: Selected Songs of Florence Price and Margaret Bonds," *Canadian University Music Review*, 16 no. 1 (1995): 74-95.

transform" the dark virgin, while her second reading ends with "self-loathing" and "self-destruction."[52] I propose a Black feminist analysis of Price's song, describing the protagonist as a Black woman who is addressing her lover, the Black virgin, whose gender identity and sexual orientation are ambiguous. I further argue that in "Song to the Dark Virgin" Price represents racism and violence against Black bodies, but she also transcends these images to create narratives of self-love and sexual freedom that empower Black women to take ownership of their bodies, their desires, and themselves.

> Would
> That I were a jewel,
> A shattered jewel,
> That all my shining brilliants
> Might fall at thy feet,
> Thou dark one.[53]

The opening of "Song to the Dark Virgin" establishes patterns that subvert musical expectations and celebrate Black resilience. Written in a modified strophic form, this song begins with a series of flowing chords that alternate between the submediant and dominant of A-flat major. Price's accompaniment creates a tranquil, flowing atmosphere that is constant but not easily confined to a single tonality, reflecting the complex multiplicity of the singer's identity as she serenades her lover. During the first phrase, Price accentuates the word "jewel" by initiating a harmonic shift from an implied dominant to a full dominant ninth chord in the piano. The vocal line then ascends and the dynamics *crescendo,* leading to a major seventh leap that lands on an accented high note, emphasizing the word "all" in "all my shining brilliants" followed by a gentle, stepwise descent. In both moments, Price celebrates an image of Black resilience in spite

[52] Peters, "Deep Rivers."

[53] Hughes originally included the Roman numerals I, II, and III before the corresponding stanzas in his poem. Each stanza is a separate "song," which suits the poem's title "Songs to the Dark Virgin."

of oppression—the "jewel" may be "shattered," but it is also beautiful. The singer's refrain, "Thou dark one," similarly emphasizes her relationship with her partner's Blackness. This moment releases the built-up tension as the vocal line briefly slows at the end of m. 5 before reverting to the original tempo in the following measure. The piano's opening figures then return and accelerate the momentum into the next phrase.

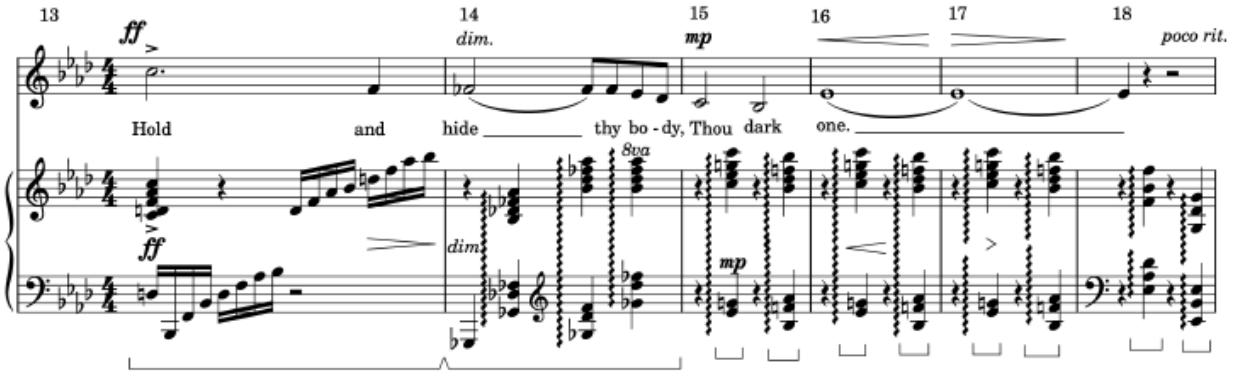
> Would
> That I were a garment,
> A shimmering, silken garment,
> That all my folds
> Might wrap about thy body,
> Absorb thy body,
> Hold and hide thy body,
> Thou dark one.

In the second section, the speaker glorifies her lover's body while also seeking to protect it from violence. The music in mm. 7–9 is similar to the beginning, with additional notes added in the baseline to emphasize the harmony. The atmosphere changes in m. 10 with a drawn out *crescendo* on the phrase "might wrap about thy body." Price further emphasizes this moment with tenuto marks over every piano chord in m. 10, and a *crescendo* that echoes the vocal line and leads to the climax of the phrase in m. 11. The raised tessitura and dynamics in the voice throughout this section emphasize the singer's thoughts about exploring her partner's body, culminating with a loud, accented, and extended C-natural on the word "hold" in m. 13.

The dramatic shift in mm. 13–18 represents the haunting threat of violence against Black bodies. As seen in Example 1, at this moment, there is a sudden change in the accompaniment as a series of arpeggiated B-flat major dominant chords introduce chromaticism into the song, which travels from the piano into the vocal line with an F-flat on the word "hide" (within the phrase "hold and hide thy body"). Smith interprets the word "hide" as an example of the singer

experiencing "collective shame" because society has taught her to hate her own skin.[54] However, I argue that this word is part of a protective instinct, rather than a self-shaming one. The chromaticism and the quiet dynamics signify that the speaker is trying to "hide" her lover, to shield them from the violence of the outside world.

Musical Example 1: Florence Price, "Song to the Dark Virgin" mm. 13–18[55]



To display this attempt, Price transforms the accompaniment to accommodate the F-flat in the voice with an extended secondary dominant chord that leads to a first-inversion C-minor chord in m.15. Then, the singer embraces her lover's darkness again in mm. 15–18 by repeating the refrain "Thou dark one" (this time, Price introduces it quietly with rests in the accompaniment underneath the beginning of each word). The piano further dramatizes this moment and punctuates the singer's loving and protective thoughts about her partner by playing soft, rolled chords on the offbeats of these measures. These supertonic and submediant chords prolong the moment before the accompaniment reaches a half cadence in m. 18. This extended and unstable moment stretches and temporarily defies the song's strophic form. Price further subverts and maintains harmonic expectations by continuing the dominant sonority in the following measure,

[54] Smith, 90.

[55] Florence Price, "Song to the Dark Virgin," in *Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers*, compiled by Willis C. Patterson, (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Company, 1977), 100.

which aligns with the pattern of sections that begin in the dominant but defies the traditional expectation of a dominant-to-tonic progression. Through the prolonged ending of this phrase, Price invokes a moment of reflection as the singer contemplates her fears and desires before reconciling these emotions in the following section.

> Would
> That I were a flame,
> But one sharp, leaping flame
> To annihilate thy body,
> Thou dark one.

In the final strophe, the singer transcends this trauma by transforming images of Black bodies to reflect her physical relationship with her partner. Price repeats a variation of the music from the beginning in mm. 19–20 before building towards the song's dramatic ending. An extended *crescendo* in m. 21 leads to the initial peak of the final section on the second syllable of the word "annihilate" with a loud, accented D-flat in m. 23. Although this word normally has a negative connotation, Price sets it in a way that sounds exciting rather than intimidating.[56] The piano also *crescendos* with a series of unstable dominant chords underneath the accented note in the vocal line, highlighting the dramatic and unpredictable nature of this moment. The singer's rhythm in mm. 22–24 further emphasizes and elongates every syllable of the phrase "to annihilate thy body"—still, without sounding threatening. Price builds on the familiarity of the opening music with a steady rise in the melody and a prolonged crescendo in both the vocal line and piano that leads to a climax in m. 23.

In contrast to the quiet moment in m. 14, when Price illustrates the singer trying to "hide" her lover's body for fear of racial violence, in m. 23 the composer suggests a bold reclamation of these fears to express the singer's sexuality. Angela Davis explains that one of the "radical

[56] Peters discusses the "deliberate ambiguity" of the word "annihilate" in Hughes's poem. Peters, 81.

transformations" in Black people's lives after slavery was gaining freewill to explore their sexual desires.[57] As a result, Black women's ability to pursue these desires transformed sex into "a tangible expression of [their] freedom."[58] Price takes this transformation one step further by reclaiming a terrorizing image and reimagining it as a celebration of sexual pleasure. Peters similarly argues that the song's reference to fire could symbolize a "flame that will consume and forever transform" the dark virgin instead of a violent and destructive force.[59] This interpretation allows room to hear the word "annihilate" as a representation of sexual pleasure. Although the description of destroying the virgin's body through flame also signifies the history of violence against Black bodies, Price uses this opportunity to resist this destruction and instead embrace positive sexuality. After this moment of triumph, the song ends with a final repetition of the refrain as the singer crescendos to a climactic ending over an extended dominant-to-tonic cadence (and one final harmonic disruption with an added F-natural in the tonic chord).

In "Song to the Dark Virgin," Price demonstrates Collins's description of Black feminist self-definition by presenting a heroine who rejects limited perceptions of Black women to embrace her identity and sexuality.[60] Although Price's song is in A-flat major, she includes several unstable moments that obscure the song's perceived tonality. The harmonic ambiguities invite listeners to look beyond the surface of their learned expectations, and I argue that these subversions also facilitate deeper consideration of the characters' identities in this song. Most interpretations assume that the singer is a straight man and the dark virgin is a woman, but that is not necessarily the case. The ambiguities that Price writes into this song provide ample room for

[57] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 8.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Peters, 80.

[60] Collins, 10.

analyses that reconsider the singer's gender identity and explore the possibility that this relationship stretches beyond the confines of heterosexuality. In my analysis, I interpret the singer as a Black woman singing to her lover, the dark virgin, but this interpretation is not bound to heteronormative ideas or closed off from the gender spectrum. This is just one example within an array of opportunities to portray the diverse nature of Black female identity and sexuality. As Collins explains, "African-American women express a range of sexualities, including celibate, heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual, with varying forms of sexual expression changing throughout an individual's life course."[1] There are a wealth of possibilities for the gender and sexual identities of the singer and the dark virgin. By playing within these realms of ambiguity, Price's song validates and reclaims the multiplicity of Black women's lives.

Price also pushes boundaries by transforming images of mental trauma into moments of resistance by confronting violence against Black bodies. In the opening section, Price acknowledges the obstacles the singer faces while also celebrating her ability to keep "shining." She presents joy in these triumphs, in spite of trauma, as the singer celebrates her lover's beautiful, dark skin. Later, Price delves deeper as the singer reveals well-founded fears of violence against Black bodies. Price clearly depicts the singer's awareness of the dangers that await her and her lover because of their skin color. The composer's quiet emphasis as the singer attempts to "hide" her lover's body, the extended crescendo over the word "flame," and the dramatic climax on the word "annihilate" provide clear parallels to the history of lynching and its merciless destruction of Black bodies. Price's music confirms that the singer's fears are justified, but rather than concealing these fears, Price depicts the singer subverting these destructive images by reimagining them as sensual explorations for herself and her partner. By claiming authority over her experiences and images of Black bodies, Price's song presents a Black woman

who has come to terms with painful struggles and grown to recognize her own self-worth and beauty in spite of them.

Celebrations of sexuality in Price's music further subvert what Collins describes as "controlling images," propaganda that disseminates negative perceptions of Black people, by replacing stigmas that label Black women as "sexually aggressive" with moments that present sexuality in a positive light.[61] Instead of feeling lustful or predatory, Price displays this body-centric language as the singer paying homage to her partner's beauty and worth, which depicts deep and loving bonds within their relationship. The connection between this couple is an important component of the singer's journey as she processes her experiences. As Davis theorizes, embracing the freedom of Black sexuality often leads to "[t]he expression of socially unfulfilled dreams in the language and imagery of sexual love."[62] In Price's song, the singer and the dark virgin work through their experiences together while finding comfort in one another's arms. By focusing on the depth and significance of this relationship, I contend that Price's music aligns with the Black feminist strategy of resisting stereotypes and creating representations of "empowerment for Black women."[63] Consequently, Price's interpretation reclaims Black women's sexuality as an important and meaningful subject that is worthy of nuanced exploration.

"Song to the Dark Virgin" is an example of what could be if Black women owned their multiplicity, their ability to survive, and the power to express their sexuality. Through her music, Price depicts the singer's journey towards a type of Black feminist self-definition as a model of these benefits, which emphasizes the power of self-love to transform Black women's lives for the better.

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[61] Collins, 10; 83.

[62] Davis, 9.

[63] Collins, 128.

"Sympathy"

"Sympathy" reflects Price's examination of how Black women learn to use self-reflection to cope with injustice. The text for this song is Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy"—a well-known work that utilizes the imagery of a bird trapped in a cage. The poet relates to the bird's yearning for freedom in the first stanza with the words "I know what the caged bird feels," followed by depictions of a beautiful spring day that the bird can no longer experience. Then the mood shifts as the bird frantically tries to escape and "beats his wing" against "the cruel bars" of his cage in a futile attempt to achieve freedom. In the final stanza, despite all of his sorrow the bird continues singing not out of "joy or glee," but because he is sending up a "prayer" asking "Heaven" to change his fate. The poem's final line, "I know why the caged bird sings," remains an iconic reference to the sorrows of the Black community—most notably through Maya Angelou's reference to it in the title of her 1969 autobiography.[64] Price's setting is part of this legacy of giving voice to Black experiences by telling the story of a woman who is struggling to overcome her own oppression. Although the singer cannot transcend her circumstances, she learns to utilize her inner strength to carry on. The song aligns with Collins's argument that, "[t]he voices of. . . African-American women are not those of victims but of survivors."[65]

Although Dunbar's text specifies that the bird is male, thus also implying a male narrator, Price's decision to dedicate this song to her daughter, Florence Price Robinson, allows listeners to hear the song within the context of Black women's experiences. Marquese Carter's discussion of "Sympathy" focuses on a narrative of Black hopefulness and resilience in the face of oppression. Carter theorizes that within its ternary structure, the A-section's E-flat major tonality

[64] Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, (Charlottesville, VA:University Press of Virginia, 1994), 102 and Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969).

[65] Collins, 98.

represents "the subject's hopes," while the "risqué progressions" of "augmented and diminished sonorities" in the B-section illustrate the struggles of being Black.[66] In the end, Carter argues that the bird's prayer reestablishes the hopeful atmosphere in the beginning of the piece, representing how religion has served as a pillar of strength for Black communities.[67]

Rae Linda Brown similarly emphasizes the song's ternary form, but her discussion foregrounds the differences within each section. She argues that the A-section creates a feeling of kinship between the singer and the caged bird, which begins with a "lyrical vocal line [that] is gently underscored by an arpeggiated accompaniment."[68] The B-section then incorporates a "quasi-recitative" style to depict changes in the text that demonstrate the speaker's painful relationship with oppression.[69] Finally, Brown concludes that the persistence of these tumultuous images in the A'-section puts the text and the music "totally at odds" until the bird's final prayer resolves the tension.[70] Although the music of "Sympathy" may appear straight-forward, both of these interpretations highlight the complexity beneath its surface, revealing how Price's music expresses a Black women's reflection on oppression, trauma, and discovering hidden strength.

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!

[66] Marquese Carter, "The Poet and Her Songs: Analyzing the Art Songs of Florence B. Price," (DMA diss. Indiana University Bloomington, 2018), 18.

[67] Carter, 16.

[68] Brown, *Heart of a Woman*, 229.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

In the A-section, Price incorporates changes in dynamics and the accompaniment to demonstrate the singer's thoughtful mood as she creates a mental sanctuary to contemplate the possibilities of freedoms that are beyond her reach. The piece begins in E-flat major, and the gentle opening melodies sit in the lower register of the singer's voice as she daydreams about the joys of a beautiful spring day.[71] Soft, arpeggiated chords in the piano accompany these images, emphasizing the tonal center. The stable, major key with its diatonic harmonies and constant confirmations of the tonic solidify the peaceful nature of the song's opening. The atmosphere then changes in m. 11, during the phrase "When the first bird sings and the first bud opes," as a series of non-diatonic notes enter the accompaniment and vocal line, complicating the singer's peaceful thoughts. Price's changes signify a shift in the singer's mentality from dreaming of freedom to realizing that oppression excludes her from achieving it. Carter similarly argues that this is the moment when the protagonist's aspirations "are dashed by the downward spiral brought on by their blackness."[72] Price brings this recognition of exclusion to a peak in mm. 15–20 with the repetition of the opening phrase "I know what the caged bird feels." The composer emphasizes these words by suddenly shifting the dynamics to *mezzo forte* on the word "I" before an octave leap to an accented and extended E-flat on the word "know"—the climax of the opening section. The accompaniment further highlights this moment by punctuating the E-flat with a series of quarter-note chords and an unstable harmonic progression that reflects the rapid deterioration of the singer's emotional state. Price's musical variations convey changes in the singer's thoughts as she grapples with the consequences of her oppression, foreshadowing the turbulent shift in the second section.

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[71] Florence Price, "Sympathy," in *Florence Beatrice Price: Five Art Songs*, edited by Rae Linda Brown, (Fayetteville, AR: Estate of Florence Price, 2011), 17-21.

[72] Carter, 18.

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!

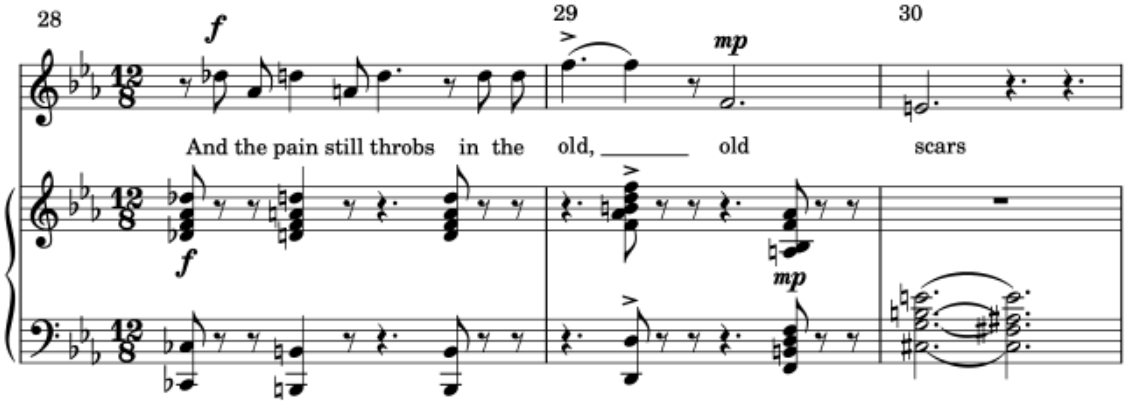
Text painting and dissonance characterize the tumultuous B-section to portray the singer's struggles with the violence of oppression. In m. 21 the music abruptly shifts from its gentle, lilting atmosphere to a more unstable mood with a loud, monotone vocal line in the new tonic of C-minor. The accompaniment also changes from arpeggios to block chords moving in step-wise motion, creating an unsettled feeling underneath the restricted vocal line. This single-note fixation sounds as if the singer's voice has become temporarily frozen within the painful imagery of "beating against the cage" to no avail. Brown remarks on the abundance of violent images in this stanza, which Price highlights with chords that "punctuate" specific words.[73] This emphasis on violence begins in mm. 22–23 during the phrase "till the blood is red on the cruel bars." Price highlights the word "blood" with an extended E-flat in the melody that mirrors the previous climactic E-flat on the word "know." Here, Price reveals the source of this forementioned knowledge by delving into the pain of subjugation, and its emotional toll on the singer. Price also incorporates several meter changes, moving from 12/8 in m. 26, to 9/8 in m.27, and back to 12/8 in m. 28. These abrupt shifts highlight the lack of stability in this section as the singer navigates the turbulent emotional atmosphere of living under oppression.

Instead of shying away from this pain, Price focuses on these images during the phrase "and the pain still throbs in the old, old scars" in mm. 28–30, as seen in Example 2. At this moment, Price utilizes text painting through a dissonant progression of chromatic chords in the

[73] Brown, *The Heart of a Woman*, 229.

accompaniment that punctuate the vocal line and represent the "throbbing" pains the bird feels from beating against the bars of his cage to achieve freedom.

Musical Example 2: Florence Price, "Sympathy" mm. 28–30[74]



The composer reiterates this pain with a loud and leaping, chromatic melody that leads to an accented high note (F) on the first "old," followed by an octave leap and a dramatic reduction to *mezzo piano* on the second "old." The accompaniment punctuates each repetition of "old" by remaining silent as the singer introduces it and then playing short, dissonant chords immediately afterwards. The drastic changes between the first and second sections of this song reveal the singer's struggle to reconcile her deepest desires with the realities of oppression, which Price explores further with a complex blend of uncertainty and hope in the final section.

> I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
> When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
> When he beats his bars and he would be free;
> It is not a carol of joy or glee,
> But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
> But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
> I know why the caged bird sings!

Although the singer has no time to recover from her emotional experience, she nevertheless finds the strength to begin a tentative path forward at the end of the song. There is

[74] Florence Price, "Sympathy," in *Florence Beatrice Price: Five Art Songs*, edited by Rae Linda Brown, (Fayetteville, AR: Estate of Florence Price, 2011), 19.

no break between the B-section and the A'-section—the music subtly, and unexpectedly, shifts from C-minor back to E-flat major in m. 33. As a result, the instability of the B-section is never fully resolved, and Price does not allow the singer time to reconcile her turbulent emotions. In the A'-section, Price blends violent imagery with the opening music. Once again, these words connect the singer's pain to images of the bird's "bruised wing" and "sore bosom," from "beating" against the "bars" of its cage. Price changes the tonality again in m. 44 when the singer realizes that the bird's song originates from "his heart's deep core"—the phrase ends with an E-natural instead of resolving to the E-flat tonic. Price's subtle and unexpected change demonstrates the singer surprising herself by accessing hidden knowledge of her personal strength. Soon after this realization, the singer leaps up a sixth to a G, the highest note in the song, in m. 47 with an extended, but unstable tonic chord in first-inversion underneath. The melody retains this raised tessitura throughout the song's final measures and ends with a final E-flat in mm. 49–50, signaling the song's resolution while also referencing the previous moments of tension with this note. The song ends with arpeggiated chords in m. 49 followed by two, incomplete, tonic chords in the final measure.

Price's narrative in "Sympathy" corresponds with Black feminist strategies by depicting the singer's attempts to create her own "safe space" to cope with oppression.[75] In the beginning, Price's tranquil music represents the singer's indulgence in the tantalizing possibilities that liberty offers and the joy she feels while contemplating them. This private "safe space" in the singer's mind allows her to fantasize about an impossible world where she could live her life without the oppressive weights of racism and sexism.[76] Since the song's heroine is unable to

[75] Collins, 101.

[76] Collins, 101.

experience these freedoms, the opening A-section represents a retreat inward to achieve temporary relief. As Collins asserts, Black women finding individual methods of dealing with racism is an important step in the journey to challenging oppression and forming self-definitions. Collins further states, "U.S. Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness, the 'inside' ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality."[77] Through the leisurely atmosphere of the opening music, Price grants the singer the opportunity to explore these ideas as a strategy for coping with the burdens of Black womanhood. Although this coping mechanism is only a temporary solution, it is an important step in Price's depiction of a Black woman who finds the courage to fight oppression from within.

Through the second section's turbulent shifts in tonality, meter, and imagery, Price displays changes in the singer's mentality as she grapples with the consequences of her oppression. Price's illustration of the singer's frantic emotional state mirrors Davis's description of how blues singer Billie Holiday addressed Black experiences in her music; she argues that, "Her songs at once reflected and conferred order upon the social experiences of black women and men and their emotional responses to those experiences."[78] Similarly, Price's song reflects the singer's emotional response to an indisputable fact—no matter how hard she fights, the singer can never fully transcend oppression or erase her experiences with it. As a Black woman, Price was well aware that living with this fact is difficult, but rather than glossing over it, the composer dug deep into that pain in the tumultuous and unstable harmonies of the B-section

[77] Ibid, 98.

[78] Davis, 142.

while and highlighting the singer's ability to persevere in spite of these emotions. Price's methods align with Collins's assertion that "Black people's ability to cope with and even transcend trouble without ignoring it means that it will not destroy us."[79] Price acknowledges the burdens of systemic oppression in this song while also citing this lifelong struggle as motivation for Black women's defiance in spite of these obstacles.

Price ends the song by empowering her heroine with a determination that mirrors what Collins describes as a Black feminist "will to resist." [80] The lack of a transition between the B-section and the A'-section, mimics the lack of resolution in Black women's lives because there is no resolution. Price reiterates this fact with the strict, ternary form of her song, which reflects the orderly structure of Dunbar's poem. This unforgiving form mirrors the circumstances of the heroine's life, which offer no reprieve from the oppressive patterns that she must endure. Similarly, despite Price's request in her letter to Serge Koussevitzky, as a Black woman she understood that she would never fully break free from racism or sexism. Still, through her music, Price portrays the singer striving to live with this reality while also finding a way to defy the burdens of her oppression. As Collins explains, Black women have to "'make a way out of no way'" to survive.[81] Although Price cannot win the ultimate battle by herself, these small acts of resistance through her music create momentum against the systems designed to subjugate her. Like many of the Black women before her, Price learned to draw on her resilience and inner strength to keep going because she recognized that her mere survival was a revolution against her oppressors.

[79] Collins, 105.

[80] Ibid, 93.

[81] Ibid, 121.

"Don't You Tell Me No"

While Price was well-known for her art songs, she composed in multiple genres including ballet, musical theater, and popular songs. "Don't You Tell Me No" is one of Price's theatrical songs and the composer wrote the text herself. I contend that the song's protagonist is a Black man making advances towards a Black woman. Price does not include the woman's responses, so her reactions to these advances are unclear. As a result, I acknowledge that my interpretation of this song may not align with the composer's intentions. Still, I perceive an insistent intensity in the male singer's requests, which I argue become increasingly aggressive as the song progresses. Consequently, I suggest that this song presents a troubling, but not unfamiliar narrative about how Black society accepts and perpetuates the subjugation of Black women—especially in domestic settings.

According to John Michael Cooper, "Don't You Tell Me No" was likely composed sometime between 1931 and 1934 as a result of Price's work in "Chicago's 'Black Belt' of theaters along State Street between 31st and 35th Streets."[82] Cooper discusses how Price incorporates "Black vernacular music" throughout this song by engaging with popular genres like the cakewalk and ragtime, and by her use of "modally ambivalent blue thirds."[83] Christine Jobson also discusses Price's references to African American popular music and further argues that "Don't You Tell Me No" is a hybrid between a pop song and an art song.[84] Jobson theorizes that the text "is written from the perspective of a man to his lover, whom he refers to as "'mama.'"[85] I agree that this song sounds like a playful exploration of a man teasing his love

[82] John Michael Cooper, "Florence Price: Don't You Tell Me No," (New York, G. Schirmer, 2020), ii.

[83] Cooper, ii.

[84] Christine Jobson, "Florence Price: An Analysis of Select Art Songs with Text by Female Poets," (DMA diss. University of Miami, 2019), 41.

[85] Jobson, 40.

interest, but I also propose an alternate, and more disturbing, interpretation: "Don't You Tell Me No" depicts the pervasive and accepted systems of abusive behaviors that Black men use to control Black women.

> Always there's something you cannot get,
> maybe the girl that you have just met,
> or some sweet baby whom you have lost
> before you stopped to count the cost.
> There's something I want now:

In the opening measures, Price's accompaniment introduces the home key of F-major with diatonic melodies and syncopated rhythms that create a deceptively light and roguish atmosphere, which I argue disguise sinister intentions.[86] The male singer's first phrase starts with the words "always there's something you cannot get," accompanied by diatonic block chords that double the vocal line followed by a playful, syncopated piano melody of eighth-notes and dotted-quarter notes in mm. 13–14. Price further dramatizes the situation in mm. 19–22 by raising the tessitura of the vocal line, beginning on E-natural and then descending as the singer laments "some sweet baby" that he "lost." This descending melodic lines persists in mm. 23–25 as the singer admits that he did not consider the "cost" of losing this other woman. Unlike the previous phrases, this one ends abruptly on a quarter-note half cadence. The progression invokes a moment of unresolved tension that Price extends by rearticulating dominant and pre-dominant sonorities during the final phrase in mm. 25–26 as the singer reveals "[t]here's something I want now."

> Oh mama, my mama, don't you tell me "No"
> 'cause mama you see I'm yearning so.
> Oh mama, sweet mama, my hands won't behave.
> For your dear charms they creep and crave.
> Don't scold me, just hold me, and fold me tight. Oh tight!
> Say, baby I'll lose my mind if you don't treat me kind.

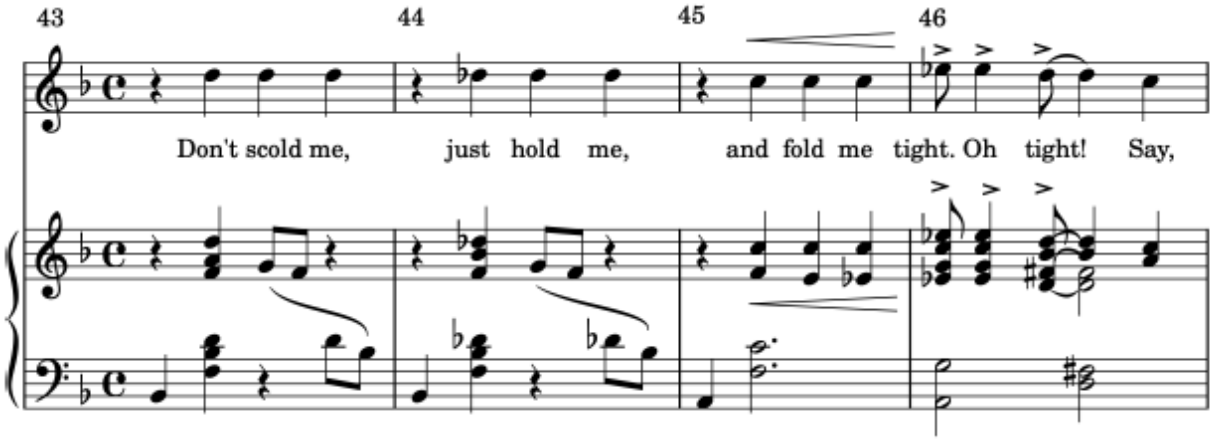
[86] Florence Price, "Don't You Tell Me No," edited by John Michael Cooper, (New York: G. Schirmer, 2020), 1–6.

So mama, sweet mama, honey to the bee
is not as sweet as you to me.

The singer becomes fixated on the women he is addressing in the chorus. He attempts to seduce her with short and bold phrases as the piano doubles the vocal line with a particular emphasis on the title phrase, "don't you tell me no," in mm. 29–30. On the final word, "no," in m. 30 both the melody and accompaniment include an A-flat, a flat-third in F major, which perpetuates the music's flirtation with blues idioms and blurs the line between minor and major sonorities. Immediately after the voice sings "no," the piano fills in the harmony with a half-diminished tonic chord in first-inversion that transforms into a dominant, submediant ninth chord—all while the voice holds the flat-third throughout the measure. Instead of the resolving these chromatic notes the accompaniment reverts back to diatonic harmonies in m. 31, leaving a feeling of unfinished business until the melody lands on a perfect authentic cadence in m.33.

Although the song repeats these patterns during the next two phrases, something changes as the singer exclaims "don't scold me, just hold me, and fold me tight. Oh tight!" As Example 3 illustrates, in mm. 43–45 the melody begins higher in the singer's voice and fixates on a single pitch that slowly descends by half-step in each measure as he pleads with the woman. The accompaniment's harmonic rhythm also slows down, indicating that Price is deliberately suspending this moment. She accentuates the words "tight, oh tight" in m. 46 as the melody rises to an E-flat, which is both the highest note in the chorus and a flat-seventh in F major. There are also accents on each word of the phrase that highlight the emphatic nature of the singer's request. The harmonic rhythm picks up again in mm. 47–50 as the melody descends on the words "say, baby, I'll lose my mind if you don't treat me kind." In the final two phrases of the chorus in mm. 51–58 the singer declares that the woman he is wooing is sweeter than honey before the entire chorus repeats and the song ends.

Musical Example 3: Florence Price, "Don't You Tell Me No" mm. 43–46[87]



The casual confidence of the opening reveals the singer's deeply engrained patterns of patriarchal thinking, which Price normalizes by not emphasizing the belittling content of the text. I argue that Price uses this normalization to reflect a disturbing societal pattern that Collins describes as the "generalized, routinized system of oppression."[88] In mm. 11–22, the singer describes women as "something you cannot get"—language that discusses these "girls" and "sweet babies" as if they are prizes that are just outside of his reach. The text demonstrates that he equates women with objects and the music reiterates this claim by doubling the singer's melody as if to confirm his problematic ideas. There is no dramatic shift to highlight the entrance of these patriarchal attitudes—in fact the harmonic and melodic structures between the first two phrases essentially remain the same. Price's subtle introduction of these ideas demonstrates how this patriarchal system automatically dismisses women's humanity without a second thought. By displaying the singer's attitude towards women, Price aligns with a tradition in women's blues that Davis describes as "naming."[89] Davis explains that "naming" is a method female blues

[87] John Michael Cooper, "Florence Price: Don't You Tell Me No," (New York, G. Schirmer, 2020), 4.

[88] Collins, 146.

[89] Davis, 28.

singers used to call out problems Black women faced instead of relegating these issues to private spaces.[90] I contend that Price's decision to utilize her music to address the normalization of Black women's subjugation in a public space is a version of naming, which facilitates a "challenge to dominant notions of women's subordination."[91]

Price escalates the singer's problematic behavior in the chorus, which demonstrates the pervasive nature of violence against women. The singer's fixation on control worsens as his requests transform into abusive demands while he strives to satisfy his desires at this woman's expense. Price's dramatization of the title phrase, "don't you tell me no," illustrates the problematic nature of this statement. Once again, the accompaniment doubles the melodic line in m. 29—this time with a more forceful atmosphere through a low and prominent bass line. This doubling both projects and reinforces the singer's troubling point of view. Then the blues-reminiscent flat-third and accompanying chromatic chords punctuate the vocal line during the word "no." This triple emphasis through rhythm, doubling, and accentuating chords depicts the emphatic nature of the speaker's words—he is showing this woman that refusal is not an option. Price's music demonstrates that social norms embrace and even encourage the singer's actions. As Davis asserts, "Violence against women remains pandemic. Almost equally pandemic [. . .] is women's inability to extricate themselves from this web of violence."[92] Price repeats the musical strategies of doubling with rhythmic and harmonic accentuation on the words "my hands won't behave," which reinforce the speaker's attempts to assert dominance and his frightening unwillingness to control himself. In the midst of this unsettling depiction, I argue that Price's song aligns with Davis's arguments that female blues singers fostered resistance through the

[90] Davis, 28.

[91] Ibid., 22.

[92] Ibid., 31.

brutal honesty in their music.[93] Davis further argues, "To name [domestic violence] so directly and openly may itself have made misogynist violence available for criticism."[94] Through this song, Price presents the horrors of domestic violence—a process that offers her audience opportunities to witness the consequences of social conventions that jeopardize women's safety.

Later in the chorus, Price exposes prevalent and problematic narratives that insist on Black women sacrificing their autonomy to satisfy Black men. The singer's instructions and excuses escalate into demands in mm. 43–46 as he tells this woman not to "scold" his advances and to hold him "tight, oh tight." The higher tessitura of the melodic line and obsessive repetition of each note exemplifies the emphatic nature of the singer's attitude. As Collins explains, Black society's endorsement of these sexist ideas perpetuates Black women's subordination and limits everyone involved to less fulfilled versions of themselves. Collins states, "Failure to challenge an overall climate that not only defines Black masculinity in terms of Black men's ability to 'own' and 'control' their women, and Black femininity in terms of Black women's ability to help U.S. Black men feel like men, can foster African-American women's abuse."[95] As Price demonstrates, the singer's escalating demands are part of a vicious cycle that threatens to rob the woman he is pursuing of her autonomy and solidify his identity as an abuser in the process—an outcome that would not benefit either of them.

Price reiterates this point by using the form of her song to replicate cycles of abuse. The final phrase includes happier imagery that focuses on "honey," "bees," and "sweetness." Initially, this seems to be a reprieve from the controlling and abusive language of the previous phrases, but then the song repeats the chorus. As a result, the woman has relive the escalation of

[93] Davis, 23.

[94] Ibid, 31.

[95] Collins, 157.

the singer's words and actions into outright controlling and manipulative demands. These repeated melodies emphasize a steadily increasing atmosphere of aggression that highlights the cycle of abuse. At first, the abuser presents himself as a kind a loving person, but slowly the atmosphere changes as he exerts more controlling behaviors over his partner. Price's music presents a miniature version of this abusive cycle in "Don't You Tell Me No," which paints a bleak but realistic picture of the abuse that Black women often experience at the hands of their loved ones. This broken system leads these women to sacrifice themselves to uphold the normalized behaviors of abusive men.

Price had first-hand knowledge of domestic violence and the damages that these relationships cause for Black women. Her husband, Thomas, was abusive, and throughout their marriage he became increasingly violent. The couple separated in 1920, and on January 19, 1931 a judge granted Price a divorce and full custody of her daughters.[96] As a woman who lived through an abusive marriage, Price was well aware of the pervasive nature of domestic violence and the social taboos that trapped women in these dangerous situations. "Don't You Tell Me No" demonstrates these problems by presenting the world as it is. Price accomplishes this through a "subversive rendering of [a] conventional and formulaic popular love song" that challenges domestic abuse and Black women's subjugation by presenting a reflection of these normalized systems and their unacceptable consequences.[97] Initially, the composer presents the singer as a charming individual because society condones and validates his behavior, but as Price's music continues his problems actions become more pronounced and harder to ignore. In this song, Price clearly demonstrates the consequences of maintaining the status quo—it endorses a system that

[96] Brown, *The Heart of a Woman*, 99-100.

[97] Davis, 182.

condemns countless Black women to lives of silent suffering at the hands of the Black men who claim to love them.

Conclusion

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins emphasizes that each individual Black woman's progress towards coping with and resisting oppression is an essential part of the journey towards the larger goal of international social justice. She explains that large-scale reform is important, but "change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness."[98] This statement encapsulates Price's journey as a Black female composer striving to build a career in Western art music. She did not have the power to overturn the systems that discriminated against her, yet through her music, she demonstrated a form of internal empowerment that yielded tangible benefits for herself and her fellow Black women.

Price's art songs illustrate the power of Black feminism by exploring individual Black women's experiences as they grapple with subjugation, devise coping strategies, manage their emotions, and create resistance against oppression. Although the outlook of some of these songs is hopeful, Price does not overlook the pain and struggles that these women face on their journeys. Her songs assert that digging into the ugliness of racism and sexism is an important part of presenting realistic depictions of Black women's lives. As a Black woman herself, Price's music reflects experiences that she was keenly aware of both in her personal and professional life. Yet, despite all of these obstacles Price never stopped fighting—and neither do the heroines of her songs.

[98] Collins, 118.

CHAPTER 3

MARGARET BONDS AND LANGSTON HUGHES: REFRAMING RACIAL UPLIFT THROUGH BLACK FEMINISM

Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes were close friends who considered themselves partners in a lifelong mission to promote Black art. The two were constantly creating new projects together, including musicals, sacred works, and art songs. Their joint purpose was to use their art to advocate for Black rights and freedoms by organizing Black communities to support one another. Although Bonds and Hughes remained dedicated to some aspects of racial uplift ideology, they were also aware of its flaws. Unlike their predecessors, Bonds and Hughes embraced the blues, jazz, and musical theater and they treated these styles as equally important components of the legacy of Black music.

Still, although they worked as a team, Hughes remains one of the most famous authors in history, while Bonds and her work receive far less recognition. This reveals another instance of history separating Black women from artistic activism and denying their achievements, which helped pave the way for others to follow. This omission parallels the broader gap of recognition between the fame of the Harlem Renaissance and its male writers and the less well-known Chicago Renaissance and its female artists. Yet, women like Margaret Bonds were an indispensable part of leading the movement to support Black artistry. Recognizing the contributions of Black women provides a more complete and nuanced depiction of the artistic development of the Chicago and Harlem Renaissances and their implications for Black Americans.

In this chapter, I argue that Hughes and Bonds's partnership exemplified Black feminist thought. Hughes utilized his male privilege and his status as a famous writer to promote Bonds's

music worldwide, while Bonds highlighted Hughes's accomplishments by setting his texts and organizing performances inspired by his work (which also employed Black musicians).[99] In addition to supporting one another, Bonds and Hughes used their status as celebrated artists to promote social justice and to show the world the power of Black artistry. By analyzing Bonds's settings of Hughes's poetry through a Black feminist lens, I explore how Black women foster resistance and self-definition in spite of oppression. Building on the work of Black feminist scholars Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis, I specifically examine Black feminist themes in the songs "Dream Variation," "Note on Commercial Theater," and "No Good Man" and contend that Bonds and Hughes utilized their art to demonstrate the resilience of the Black female protagonists in these songs while still acknowledging the hardships of Black womanhood. As a result, their partnership exemplifies how alliances between Black men and Black women benefit both groups and facilitate the success of Black society as a whole.

Bonds and Hughes: A Collaborative Duo

When Bonds encountered Langston Hughes, she discovered a kindred spirit and forged a connection that would benefit both of their careers—as well as the Black artistic community as a whole. She first discovered Hughes's poetry during her freshman year at Northwestern University.[100] Although Northwestern accepted Black students, there was no lodging for them at

[99] For instance, on April 27, 1958, Bonds arranged a concert of songs set to Hughes's poetry. Hughes was overjoyed by this performance, and he sent Bonds a letter thanking her for "this delightful tribute" to his poems. Langston Hughes, "Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship," Special Collections Gallery, Georgetown University Library, August 30, 2016–January 24, 2017, accessed on March 23, 2020, https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/margaret-bonds-and-langston-hughes-musical-friendship.

[100] Anna Celenza, "Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship," Special Collections Gallery, Georgetown University Library, August 30, 2016–January 24, 2017, accessed on March 23, 2020, https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/margaret-bonds-and-langston-hughes-musical-friendship.

the school and they also faced significant discrimination within the surrounding community.[101] Tammy L. Kernodle describes this time in Bonds's life as a moment of "social and emotional change" and states that Northwestern reiterated the race and gender barriers standing against Bonds that "would always determine how she was heard and how she was seen."[102] During this time, Bonds turned to Black poetry for comfort, where she discovered Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921). This poem gave her the courage to carry on in spite of the prejudice she was facing; as she explained, "Because in that poem he tells how great the black man is. And if I had any misgivings, which I would have to have—here you are in a setup where the restaurants won't serve you and you're going to college, you're sacrificing, trying to get through school—and I know that poem helped save me."[103] When she finally met Hughes in 1936, the two formed an instant bond that blossomed into a lifelong friendship and collaboration.[104]

The intimate, artistic partnership between Bonds and Hughes reflects their mutual dedication to promoting Black art. Almost as soon as they met, Bonds considered Hughes part of her family. She often called him her "soul mate" and "blood brother" and Bonds's daughter Djane affectionally referred to the poet as "Uncle Langston."[105] This level of intimacy persisted in their professional roles as artists, and in their correspondence they often referred to pieces that they were collaborating on as "our song" or "our show."[106] Both considered themselves equals in

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[101] Helen Walker-Hill, *From Spirituals to Symphonies: African-American Women Composers and Their Music*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 147.

[102] Tammy L. Kernodle, "Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship," YouTube Video, 51:06. September 27, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsYFRs39PSY.

[103] Celenza, "Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship," https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/margaret-bonds-and-langston-hughes-musical-friendship.

[104] Walker-Hill, *From Spirituals to Symphonies*,149.

[105] Ibid, 152; 155.

[106] Langston Hughes, "Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship," https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/margaret-bonds-and-langston-hughes-musical-friendship.

their artistic partnership—a team working towards a common goal of promoting Black music and musicians.

After Bonds set "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in 1942, she and Hughes worked to organize multiple performances of this song, and Bonds even made different arrangements of it for several choirs to maximize these performances.[107] The two also collaborated on several musicals, including *Tropics After Dark* (1940) and *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1960), which they encouraged Black venues to stage and Black audiences to attend. Hughes promoted Bonds's music during his travels abroad, and his efforts during a tour through several African countries popularized her work on the continent, leading to the Nigerian premiere of their cantata *Ballad of the Brown King* in 1966. Together, the pair worked like a well-oiled machine created to proclaim Black experiences far and wide. Their friendship and teamwork inspired Bonds to expand her personal efforts to use her growing influence to help other Black artists reach their full potential.

Analyzing their song collaborations from a modern perspective, I contend that they align with Black feminist themes, most notably rejecting "controlling images," which stigmatize Black people and Black culture, and striving for self-definition in the face of oppression.[108] By connecting these themes to Black women's experiences through her music, Bonds simultaneously demonstrates the burdens of these heroines and their strength in resisting obstacles by striving to create their own narratives.

"Dream Variation"

In 1955, Bonds wrote to tell Hughes that she set his poem "Minstrel Man" and she was

[107] Celenza, "Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship," https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/margaret-bonds-and-langston-hughes-musical-friendship.

[108] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 10.

"quite pleased" with the song because "the music marries the poem."[109] This marked the beginning of her most well-known song cycle, *Three Dream Portraits*. Baritone Lawrence Watson premiered these songs in May 1959 at a NAMN concert in Columbus, Ohio just before the music was published.[110] The cycle contains three songs set to Hughes's poems: "Minstrel Man," "Dream Variation," and "I, Too." Bonds dedicated "Minstrel Man" and "I, Too" to baritone Lawrence Winters and she dedicated "Dream Variation" to soprano Adele Addison. Although there is no record of the singers performing their designated songs, these dedications reflect a redefined spirit of racial uplift by granting opportunities to Black singers while highlighting idioms of African American popular music.[111] Furthermore, I argue that as a song written by a Black woman and dedicated to a Black woman, "Dream Variation" is particularly relevant to Black women's experiences.

Multiple scholars have analyzed "Dream Variation" by discussing its role in *Three Dream Portraits* and theorizing about its tonal ambiguity and inclusion of vernacular African American musical idioms.[112] Helen Walker-Hill describes the song as a "gentle contrast to the anguish of 'Minstrel Man.' In a bright major key, its meter is a lilting 12/8."[113] Walker-Hill adds that Bonds incorporated quartal harmonies to establish "an impressionistic, dreamy, bell-like effect" in the accompaniment.[114] She concludes that the song's text painting, rhythmic shifts, "independent piano part," and African American musical idioms are all characteristic of Bonds's

[109] Walker-Hill, 168.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Walker-Hill, 168-169.

[112] Alethea N. Kilgore and Albert Rudolph Lee Jr. also analyze Bonds's *Three Dream Portraits* in their DMA dissertations. Although I do not discuss their writing in this chapter I have read their work, and as a result I have included citations for their dissertations in my bibliography.

[113] Walker-Hill, 169.

[114] Ibid.

broader art song style.[115] Mildred Denby Green describes "Dream Variation" as part of a shift within *Three Dream Portraits*, a transformation from somber reflection in the first song to hopeful exploration and resilience. According to Green, Bonds's arrangement of these poems in the song cycle forms "a progression from despair and resignation to hope—a mirror of the reality of black life in America from the early 1900s until the late 1950s."[116] Regarding "Dream Variation" specifically, Green also characterizes its tonal ambiguity as "an allusion to dreaming" and discusses the overall, calming atmosphere of the song.[117]

Penelope Peters's analysis takes an even more optimistic approach by suggesting that within the context of slavery, the song's night imagery symbolizes hope and possibility. Peters states that, "the African American slave belonged to the white owner from sun-up to sun-down, but was generally without duties and free to relax at night. Thus, the night represented a magical time of dreams and freedom."[118] Although the constant oppression of enslaved people made it impossible for them to let their guard down completely, Peters suggests that night offered enslaved African Americans greater opportunities to engage with their communities, foster resistance, and perhaps examine their thoughts. Like Walker-Hill and Green, Peters discusses how Bonds utilized dissonance and jazz idioms to suspended tonality throughout the majority of the song, but Peters further theorizes that the elusive tonal center represents the protagonist's freedom, which only exists in a dream.[119]

Through the combination of Hughes's poetry and Bonds's music, I suggest that "Dream

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[115] Walker-Hill, 170.

[116] Mildred Denby Green, *Black Women Composers: A Genesis*, (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co, 1983), 55.

[117] Green, 58.

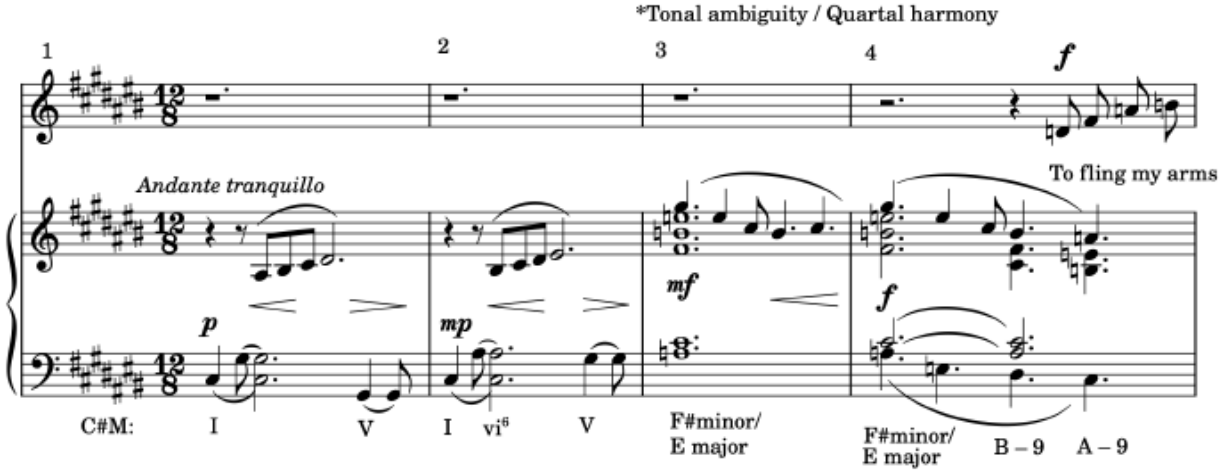
[118] Penelope Peters, "Deep Rivers: Selected Songs of Florence Price and Margaret Bonds," *Canadian University Music Review*, 16 no. 1 (1995): 87.

[119] Peters, 87-88.

Variation" corresponds with several aspects of Black feminist thought by telling the story of a Black female protagonist's journey from indulging in fanciful escapism to navigating the trials of reality. The protagonist seeks shelter by imagining a new world to protect herself from oppressive forces. Although her mental fortress cannot shield the singer for long, this strategy gives her time to gather her strength as she prepares not only to weather, but to resist these obstacles. I further argue that this song reflects how Black feminist strategies of survival and resistance enable Black women to own their power, which in turn contributes to the collective empowerment of Black communities.

> To fling my arms wide
> In some place of the sun,
> To whirl and to dance
> Till the white day is done.
> Then rest at cool evening
> Beneath a tall tree
> While night comes on gently,
> Dark like me,—
> That is my dream!

Musical Example 4: Margaret Bonds, "Dream Variation, mm. 1–4[120]



[120] Margaret Bonds, "Dream Variations," in *Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers*, compiled by Willis C. Patterson, (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Company, 1977), 120.

Bonds expands on the dreamworld that Hughes depicts in the protagonist's mind by establishing a lighthearted atmosphere as the singer fantasizes about a peaceful existence to shield herself from an oppressive reality.[121] The accompaniment begins with a call-and-response pattern between the right and left hands of the piano—the left hand establishes the key of C-sharp major while the right hand responds with a stepwise, four-note melody. This pleasant, conversational atmosphere recurs throughout the piece, representing the singer's dreams of a better world. Society has not offered her the opportunity to experience the freedoms that she longs for, so she achieves temporary relief by retreating into the dream world. This aligns with Black feminist strategy as the singer creates a "safe space" in her mind to defy intersectional oppression.[122]

Bonds depicts the unpredictable nature of this imagined world through jazz idioms that complicate the song's tonality and demonstrate the singer's transcendence on the path to self-definition. As seen in Example 4, there is a sudden shift in m. 3 as the accompaniment layers an F-sharp minor chord on top of an E-major chord. The dynamics quickly shift to highlight the intriguing moments of dual tonality in mm. 3–4. Bonds also introduces contemporary jazz idioms in these measures by incorporating quartal harmonies, which she utilizes throughout the song to further maintain a sense of tonal ambiguity. The presence of these jazz elements represents Bonds's rejection of the classicist undertones of racial uplift. On the contrary, the composer uses jazz to complicate tonality in her music. Blurring the song's tonal center with these swift and unexpected changes also allows Bonds to replicate the singer's otherworldly state of mind in the accompaniment. Oppression has such a constant presence in the singer's life that

[121] Margaret Bonds, "Dream Variations," in *Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers*, compiled by Willis C. Patterson, (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Company, 1977), 120-122.

[122] Collins, 101.

invoking Black feminist principles of self-definition requires stepping outside of her own consciousness. As author Pauli Murray explains, to achieve their goals Black "'women must 'jump outside' the frames and systems authorities provide and create their own frame.'"[123] Inventing a dream world is the first step in the protagonist's journey towards redefining herself outside of the context of her oppression.

> To fling my arms wide
> In the face of the sun,
> Dance! whirl! whirl!
> Till the quick day is done.
> Rest at pale evening. . . .
> A tall, slim tree. . . .
> Night coming tenderly
> Black like me.

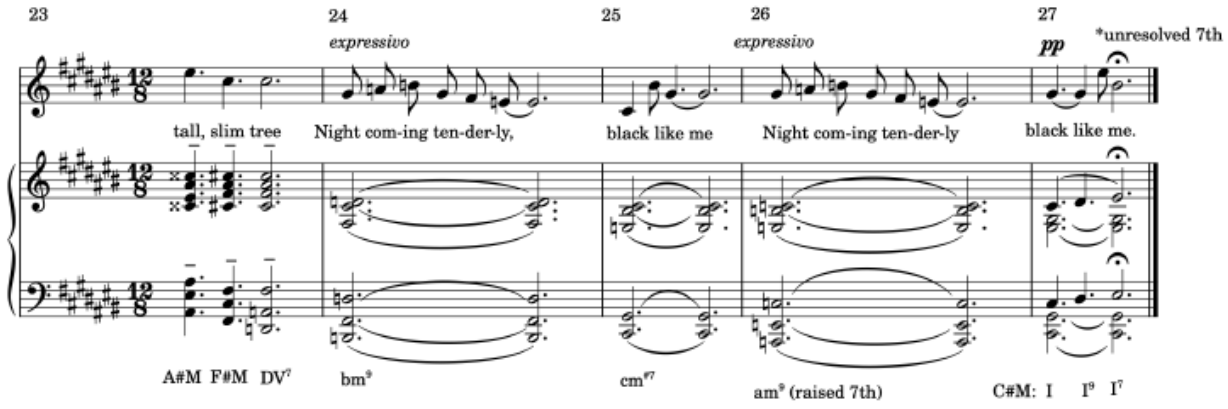
As the song progresses, rhythmic and harmonic changes indicate the singer waking up as the horrors of her reality overtake the "safe space" in her mind.[124] Since Bonds uses a modified strophic form, the music for the second half of the song begins much like the first with a few variations, including a series of dance rhythms that emphasize the declarations "Dance! Whirl! Whirl!" in mm.18–19. In these measures, the music *crescendos* before the voice and piano form a charming, waltz-like pattern, representing the last moment of joy in the singer's dream. The atmosphere then begins to change towards the end of m. 19, with a *decrescendo* in the vocal line followed by a softer, lower, and more melancholy accompaniment. These changes represent a shift in the song's atmosphere as the oppressions that dominate Black women's lives invade the singer's consciousness. On the words "Rest at pale evening" in mm. 21–22 the melody remains the same as it was in mm. 9–10, but unlike the peaceful atmosphere at the beginning of the song this repetition feels much more ominous. In the transition between m. 20 and m. 21, both the

[123] Collins, 101.

[124] Ibid.

singer and the pianist become very quiet, and everything seems to stand still as the bass line suspends an extended F-minor tonic. The accompaniment also adopts a slow and somber pattern of dotted-quarter-notes in mm. 21–22 as the singer matches its gradual, funerial pace. The quick and lighthearted tempo of her dream has vanished as sobering realities set in. Despite the singer's best efforts, the shelter that she created was only a temporary barrier against the dangers that threaten her existence.

Musical Example 5: Margaret Bonds, "Dream Variation" mm. 23–27[125]



Bonds's emphasis on the phrase "A tall, slim tree" in m. 23, expresses the anxieties that plague Black bodies as the singer contemplates the legacy of lynching. After the phrase "Rest at pale evening," the music slows down even more to focus on these three words. The singer leaps a major seventh from an F to an E, which situates the word "tall" in a higher, and naturally louder, part of her voice. As seen in Example 5, the piano matches the singer's rhythm with widely spaced chords—including an A-sharp major triad, an F-sharp major triad, and a D-major seventh chord. This chromatic, yet consonant progression has an unstable ending with sevenths in the voice and piano that never resolve. Both Hughes and Bonds draw attention to the violent

[125] Margaret Bonds, "Dream Variations," in *Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers*, compiled by Willis C. Patterson, (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Company, 1977), 122.

undertones of this imagery by repeating and emphasizing the phrases "Rest at pale evening" and "A tall, slim tree." In Bonds's song, the repetition in mm. 21–23 sheds new light on the word "rest" by abandoning its previous, peaceful connotations to symbolize eternal rest through death. As a Black woman, the threat of lynching has haunted the singer her entire life and as this thought returns to her consciousness she officially leaves the land of dreams and returns to the harsh reality of her world.

Still, despite these terrifying truths, the singer's response aligns with the Black feminist strategies of forming self-definitions and resisting oppression to build a more hopeful future. The moment of transition between the fears the singer grapples with as a Black woman and her decision to embrace the beauty of her identity occurs at the end of the song. In mm. 24–27, the singer repeats the phrase "Night coming tenderly, Black like me," and initially the melody sits in a lower and quieter register of her voice. The piano sustains a series of dissonant minor seventh and ninth chords in mm. 24–26, contributing to the unsettling atmosphere of these phrases. Suddenly, the mood changes as the tonality returns to the original key of C-sharp major, and very quietly the singer shifts back to her higher register during the phrase "Black like me." The accompaniment extends the C-sharp major tonic, culminating with an unstable tonic seventh chord with a seventh in the voice that will never resolve. I hear this instance of a clear, although unstable, tonality as a fragile moment of hope.[126] Finally, the singer embraces her Blackness as a positive aspect of her identity, in spite of how others may see it. Consequently, I see Bonds's portrayal of her heroine as an example of how Black feminist self-definition helps Black women resist oppression to facilitate a path forward.

[126] Peters similarly interprets Bonds's return to C-sharp major at the end of the piece as a moment that foreshadows a positive outcome in the singer's "ultimate dream for equality." Peters, 88.

Through the protagonist's journey from dream state to empowerment, I argue that Bonds and Hughes demonstrate a more nuanced and practical approach than traditional ideas of racial uplift. Although the latter was designed to assist Black communities, the roots of racial uplift include biases against specific classes and cultural practices in Black society that often mirror discrimination and hinder its cause. In "Dream Variation," Bonds expands the concept of uplift to include African American vernacular music as a rich and valuable component of Black artistry. This song also corresponds with Black feminist strategies that give Black women the tools to defy the obstacles that attempt to limit them, enabling these women to empower themselves in their fights against oppression. By helping Black women create their own outlets, confront harsh realities, and resist discriminatory attitudes, Black feminist thought allows individuals to find their own strength and utilize that power to uplift marginalized communities.

"Note on Commercial Theater"

In 1960, Bonds set Hughes's poem "Note on Commercial Theater," which explores the long and complicated history of cultural appropriation in the arts. Hughes was particularly vocal about the problem of white artists exploiting Black creativity by reproducing Black artists' material and reaping the benefits of fame and fortune at their expense. As he wrote in 1955, "the white performers can carry their copies of Negro material into the best nightclubs, the biggest theaters, and onto the movie screens of Hollywood. . . not to speak of the fields of radio and television where colored performers with regular jobs are few and very, very far between."[127] Since white performers had access to more venues and opportunities than Black performers, they automatically had an advantage in terms of earning more money—regardless of whether or not

[127] Langston Hughes, "Highway Robbery Across the Color Line in Rhythm and Blues," *Chicago Defender* (1955): 9.

they created the material themselves. In "Note on Commercial Theater," Hughes mentions three specific examples of white appropriation of Black culture: *Macbeth*, *Carmen Jones*, and *The Swing Mikado*. In 1936, Orson Welles adapted and directed a production of Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* in Harlem. With Black audiences in mind, Welles changed the setting from Scotland to an unspecified island (with a strong resemblance to Haiti) and he replaced the witchcraft in the plot with voodoo, thus earning the production's nickname: *Voodoo Macbeth*. [128] Likewise, Oscar Hammerstein II's 1943 Broadway musical *Carmen Jones* was a rebranding of Bizet's opera *Carmen*. Hammerstein set the action in World War II with Black characters, and he wrote new words to Bizet's music in a misguided attempt at a Black dialect.[129] Finally, the 1938 production of *The Swing Mikado* in Chicago was yet another altered version of an opera for an all-Black cast. This time, director Harry Minturn employed arranger Gentry Warden to adapt Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *The Mikado*. Minturn changed the setting to an unspecified island in the "South Seas" and Warden transformed five songs into swing numbers. [130] Although performers and audiences of the past saw these shows as spectacular achievements for the Black artistic community, the fact remains that white men, not Black artists, reaped most of the benefits from these productions.

Although Bonds and Hughes specifically address white cultural appropriations of African American musical idioms, in the process they also implicate the classist ideals of racial uplift.

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[128] "Orson Welles' Voodoo Macbeth: A Forgotten Diversity Landmark," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, March 22, 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/28dwHRWzx67yZM0158wZ5SN/orson-welles-voodoo-macbeth-a-forgotten-diversity-landmark.

[129] James Reel, "George Bizet: *Carmen Jones*, musical play (adapted from *Carmen* by Oscar Hammerstein II), *AllMusic*, https://www.allmusic.com/composition/carmen-jones-musical-play-adapted-from-carmen-by-oscar-hammerstein-ii-mc0002396976.

[130] Stephen M. Vallillo, "The Battle of the Black Mikados," *Black American Literature Forum*, 16, no. 4 (Winter 1982), 153.

Bonds utilizes the blues technique of "naming" this problem by repeating the phrase "You've taken my blues" and highlighting the issue of including African American elements in classical music without acknowledging its roots in popular Black culture.[131] Ultimately, I argue that Bonds's "Note on Commercial Theater" parallels Black feminist thought by portraying a protagonist who defies intersectional oppression against race, gender, and class by taking control of their image. I specifically hear this protagonist as a Black woman given Bonds's dedication of this song to Georgia Davis and musical features that I interpret as references to the Black women of the blues.[132]

> You've taken my blues and gone—
> You sing 'em on Broadway
> And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
> And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
> And you fixed 'em
> So they don't sound like me.
> Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

I argue that the low tessitura of this song evokes the legendary blues queens and the history of intersectional oppression surrounding this genre. The piano introduction begins with a pensive, descending melody that leads to the tonic, D minor, in m. 2 with a *sforzando* on a low, rolled chord.[133] When the singer enters in m. 5, she reiterates the song's lowness by starting the opening phrase "You've taken my blues" on a low A. Bonds repeatedly highlights prominent low notes in the voice throughout the song, which are reminiscent of the deep and powerful sound of women like Ma Rainey, the Mother of the Blues, and Bessie Smith, the Empress of the

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[131] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 28.

[132] Unfortunately, it is unclear which specific woman this dedication refers to because there are multiple candidates. Still, this is likely another example of a song written by a Black woman and dedicated to another Black woman.

[133] Margaret Bonds, "Note on Commercial Theater," edited by John Michael Cooper, (John Michael Cooper, 2018), 1-8.

Blues. Although these women were an essential part of creating, transforming, and popularizing the blues, Angela Davis explains that as Black women they faced intersecting oppression against their race and gender that threatened their legacies in this genre.[134] Consequently, blues queens fought for recognition of their artistry, which set a precedent of women creating spaces for themselves in the blues.[135] Davis elaborates, "For in defending as well as performing the blues [Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith] were establishing it as a genre that belonged to women as much as men. They were also implicitly defining the blues as a site where women could articulate and communicate their protests against male dominance."[136] Much like the song's protagonist, the blues queens were marginalized within their own musical tradition.

Bonds draws further attention to the significance of the blues by repeating the phrase "You've taken my blues," and establishing it as the song's refrain. Although this line only appears twice in Hughes's poem, Bonds focuses on these words by having the singer repeat them three times in her opening melody. The piano accompanies these repetitions with simple, diatonic chords to underscore the voice, before adopting a beautiful and mournful countermelody in mm. 8–9. Simultaneously, the accompaniment expands the tonality by suggesting seventh and ninth chords over extended dominant and tonic sonorities to embellish the phrase. This accompaniment calls further attention to the first three repetitions of "You've taken my blues" before the entire section repeats in mm. 9–13. Bonds expands on the pain this theft causes the singer by transforming "You've taken my blues" into the refrain and repeating it twelve times in the song.

In the poem, Hughes boldly names instances of appropriation both within and outside of

[134] Davis, 127–128.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid, 128.

Black culture, which Bonds accentuates with changes in meter and rhythm that imitate how people alter the blues to fit their commercial desires. In m. 14, the music transitions from 6/8 to 9/8 and the melody becomes more syncopated to mirror the popular styles audiences would hear "on Broadway" and in the "Hollywood Bowl." These well-known venues were an important part of white artists' success, but Black artists were often excluded from them. Bonds further accentuates these distortions of Black culture through constant harmonic changes. The tonality subtly changes from D-minor to F-major in mm. 14–15, before shifting to A-minor in mm. 16–17. The piano also adopts a steady pattern of dotted-quarter-note seventh chords that emphasize the rapid harmonic shifts in this section.

By specifying "symphonies" as another site of exploitation, Bonds and Hughes also "name" a specific problem within racial uplift ideology, which allows Black classical composers to simultaneously use and disrespect African American vernacular styles.[137] In their attempts to serve racial uplift, many Black leaders perpetuated the ideals of white society by marginalizing the blues as low-class, sinful, and unworthy. Yet, despite this demonization, when incorporating the blues into genres of Western music became popular many artists capitalized on this trend. Bonds references this issue within the Black artistic community in m. 16 as the singer incorporates duplets, a sophisticated method of syncopation, to represent the blues in "symphonies." During m. 18, the music begins to shift back to the tonic as the melody outlines a D-minor tonic seventh chord with an extended, unresolved seventh, while the singer laments that those blues "don't sound like me." Highlighting this separation of African American vernacular music from its culture aligns with what Davis describes as the blues tradition of "naming"

[137] Davis, 28.

problems in society instead of hiding from them.[138] Both Hughes and Bonds choose to "name" the prominence of internal discrimination within Black communities, which disregards the roots and cultural significance of the blues by becoming more concerned with its style than its substance.[139]

Although Bonds remains part of the Western art music tradition, she defies classist marginalization by honoring the power and importance of African American vernacular music in her work. Consequently, Bonds's accompaniment displays an emotional response to this internal betrayal in mm. 19–20 with a series of loud and unstable ninth and seventh chords as the music transitions back to its original D-minor tonic. Then, in m. 20 the meter changes back to 12/8 and Bonds provides a stark moment of reflection on the world "Yep," which she specified can be either sung or spoken. Afterwards, there is a significant pause before the singer breaks her silence, repeating a variation of the soft and disheartened "You've taken my blues" refrain with more complex accompaniment patterns that further blur the tonal center. Through this return, Bonds sets the stage for the singer's emotional response to being cut out of her own cultural heritage.

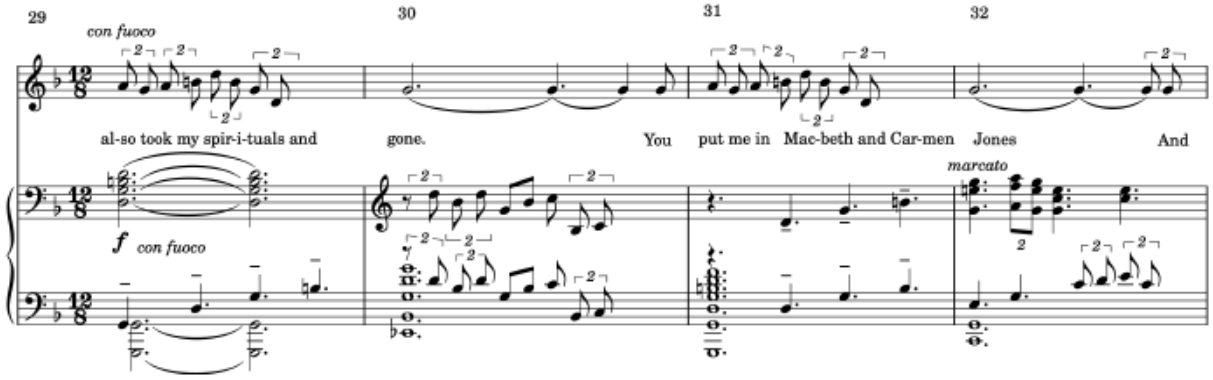
> You also took my spirituals and gone.
> You put in me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
> And all kinds of Swing Mikados
> And in everything but what's about me—
> But someday somebody'll
> Stand up and talk about me,
> And write about me—
> Black and beautiful—
> And sing about me,
> And put on plays about me!
> I reckon it'll be
> Me myself!
> Yes it'll be me.

[138] Davis, 28–29.

[139] Ibid.

The dramatic shift in mm. 29–37 exemplifies the singer's distress and mimics the power of the blues to express Black women's sorrows. As seen in Example 6, in m. 29 the song's atmosphere changes as the dynamics become louder while the singer tells a more specific story about the costs of cultural appropriation. Suddenly, the music tonicizes G-major as the singer incorporates a drastic rhythmic change with an entire measure of duplets. Unlike the first appearance of duplets in m. 16, this version is more pronounced and these rhythmic figures extend to the piano in mm. 30, 32, and 33. The duplets slow down the momentum, which emphasizes the singer's specific examples of people taking her "spirituals" and putting her "in Macbeth and Carmen Jones." Appropriately, Bonds incorporates syncopation in the phrase "And all kinds of Swing Mikados." Then in m. 34 the metric shift to 9/8 anticipates a dramatic moment, as the piano sustains a diminished supertonic chord while the singer declares that she is in "ev'ry thing but what's about me."

Musical Example 6: Margaret Bonds, "Note on Commercial Theater" mm. 29–32[140]



During the song's climax, Bonds depicts the singer's emotional breaking point as a result of cultural appropriation. In m. 35 the singer ascends to an accented, extended, and *fortissimo* high note on the word "me." The accompaniment matches the singer's loud dynamics by

[140] Margaret Bonds, "Note on Commercial Theater," edited by John Michael Cooper, (John Michael Cooper, 2018), 5-6.

repeating accented, inverted supertonic ninth chords, which lead to parallel octave melodies in mm. 36–37 as the meter changes to 6/8. Through the intensity of this section, Bonds gives voice to the emotional pain that the singer feels as a Black woman who has been robbed of her creative outlet. This loss is monumental because the blues not only express Black women's intersectional oppression, but they also create a way for Black people as a whole to process their grief, which is essential to finding the strength to survive. Davis discusses how Black women utilized their pain to create music that spoke to generations of Black citizens. Davis further describes "[t]he power of the blues to exorcise black people's emotional anguish" through an artform that "represents the collective woes of the community."[141] As the singer expresses, the blues are deeper than the people who have taken them from her realize. They are not just a popular trend—they are an essential element of her survival.

After the singer laments her lost blues, she begins to turn her thoughts towards activism. Bonds foreshadows an emotional turning point in m. 38 when the meter shifts back to 12/8 and the accompaniment returns to the home key of D-minor. Tensions start to subside when the piano resolves an extended and solitary G to an A and takes up the refrain's D-minor melody in mm. 38–42 while the singer quietly begins a new and more hopeful melodic line. This melody starts higher in her voice in m. 39 and slowly descends on the words "But someday somebody'll / Stand up." She becomes louder in mm. 40–41 as she resumes a variation of the refrain's melody, which leads to the phrase "Black and beautiful." The singer becomes more confident as her melody ascends and crescendos from *forte* in m. 44 to *fortissimo* in m. 45. The pitch and volume of her vocal line rise when she realizes that the power to confront this situation lies within her grasp. Just like the audiences of the blues queens, Bonds displays how the singer's interaction

[141] Davis, 134-135.

with her own rendition of the blues allows her to work through her feelings and move forward. This aligns with Collins's contention that "Black women have also stressed the importance of self-definition as part of the journey from victimization to a free mind in their blues."[142]

The accompaniment echoes the singer's conviction to represent herself in m. 44 as the piano punctuates her words with duplets and chords that match the vocal line, and in m. 46 when the accompaniment anticipates the melody's pattern of alternating thirds. When the singer delivers her final, extended note in mm. 47–49 the pianist dramatizes the ending by adding momentum, playing a variation of the refrain, and changing the tonality to end the song in D-major. Singing the blues gave the heroine the freedom to express her feelings and the clarity of mind to address her problem.

In their "Note on Commercial Theater," Bonds and Hughes paid homage to the blues while also highlighting problematic aspects of Black society. As active members in the theater scenes of Chicago and New York, the collaborators had intimate knowledge of shows that capitalized on Blackness as a selling point—in fact, Bonds played piano for a production of *Carmen Jones* after she moved to New York.[143] These productions provided jobs for several Black actors and musicians, but by citing specific examples Bonds and Hughes ask Black citizens to reconsider their success in terms of representing the essence of African American musical idioms and culture. In addition, they "name" the problem of some Black composers incorporating spirituals, jazz, and the blues into art music without acknowledging the lack of respect for these genres and their creators in racial uplift ideology.[144] This song is a call to arms for Black artists, and specifically Black women, to reclaim their cultural heritage for themselves.

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[142] Collins, 112.

[143] Walker-Hill, 150.

[144] Davis, 28.

By celebrating the blues and demonstrating its ability to empower the singer, Bonds and Hughes created a window into the possibilities for Black women who learn to harness their power to make a difference for Black society as a whole.

"No Good Man"

"No Good Man" (1950) is a commentary on Black relationships and the challenges that Black women face while trying to embody an idealized, and unrealistic, version of domestic life. Although Bonds presents these ideas in a lighthearted theater song, its content reveals a troubling portrait of how Black society normalizes the subjugation of Black women.

This song is likely the result of one of the many musical theater projects that Bonds and Hughes collaborated on throughout their careers. Although many of these shows are now lost, the artists' correspondence reveals that they were always thinking about creating new works. In 1965, for example, Bonds wrote a letter to Hughes asking, "Want to write a show? I KNOW I have the germ idea of a sure-fire musical now. I want an ON Broadway show. . . proportions of 'The King and I'. . . or 'Guys and Dolls.'"[145] Much like the theatrical duos Rogers and Hammerstein and Gilbert and Sullivan, Bonds and Hughes never stopped working to create their next big show. With its upbeat atmosphere and catchy hook, "No Good Man" would be a fine addition to one of their productions. The singer relates how her man is far from perfect, but she overlooks his flaws because she loves being with him. Although the singer tries to ignore these problems, I hear this denial as a result of an "internalized oppression" that conditions Black women to accept and perpetuate their marginalized roles in life.[146] I further argue that "No Good

[145] Margaret Bonds, "Letter from Margaret Bonds to Langston Hughes, dated August 8, 1965," "Margaret Bonds and Langston Hughes: A Musical Friendship," Special Collections Gallery, Georgetown University Library, August 30, 2016–January 24, 2017, accessed on March 23, 2020, https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/margaret-bonds-and-langston-hughes-musical-friendship.

[146] Collins, 93.

Man," aligns with the Black feminist techniques that female blues singers used to expose Black women's subjugation in domestic spheres, display these problematic attitudes, and foster solidarity among women who experience this oppression.

> You're a no good man but you do me good somehow.
> Yes, you stay out late but when you come home you're a "Wow."
> When you've got your fin'ry on
> You're the handsomest thing that's ever been born.
> And when I fall into your lovin' arms
> I fall a victim to your no good charms.
> You're just a no good man but you do me good somehow.
> You're such a lazy man but if it's love, you can and how.
> You've got ev'rything I need,
> got the think that it takes to make me follow your lead,
> You're just a no good man but you do me good somehow.

The singer's description of her lover as a "no good man" seems like a joke, however, as the song progresses, Bonds gradually reveals that this song is an imitation of how society normalizes Black women's subjugation. Bonds's music begins with a lively piano introduction and a syncopated melody, which establishes a deceptively lighthearted mood.[147] This opening also incorporates several chromatic notes that blur the suggested tonality of E-flat major and hint at shifts between this tonic and E-minor. Since the chorus begins high in the singer's range and then descends it adds a buoyant quality to her attitude as she talks about how her lover "does her good." Her vocal line is also heavily syncopated throughout the chorus, lending a dance-like feeling to the song. The extended notes at the end of her phrases, beginning in mm. 6–8, allow the piano to fill in a series of playful melodies that confirm this jubilant atmosphere. After m. 36 the singer repeats the chorus, thus solidifying the happy, dancing mood in this song.

This chorus is so convincing that it disguises hints of problematic elements in Hughes's text—including the fact that the singer's partner "stays out late," has "no good charms," and he is

[147] Margaret Bonds, "No Good Man," edited by John Michael Cooper, (John Michael Cooper, 2019), 1-6.

"lazy." These are the first indications that this relationship is not ideal and by naming them, even in jest, Hughes aligns with the same Black feminist tactics that female blues singers employ.[148] Davis describes how the women of the blues often contradicted images of perfect relationships by "debunking the notion that fulfillment of conventional domestic responsibilities is the basis for happiness."[149] Although Hughes defies the image of domestic bliss early on, Bonds maintains the illusion to mimic Black society's acceptance of inequality in relationships between Black men and Black women.[150] Consequently, by presenting the singer's flawed relationship in a positive light at the beginning of the song, Bonds replicates the problematic system of subjugation and denial in Black domestic life.

> Work and scrub, rub in a tub
> Cook and clean 'til I get tired and mean,
> You don't do a thing but just lounge around
> Smoking big cigars and drinking Seagram's Crown,
> Then I get aggravated and feeling bad
> Until I get to thinking 'bout the fun we've had.

Bonds delves further into these problems in the patter section by providing a brief glimpse into the singer's emotions, sending a signal to other women in this situation that they are not alone. As Example 7 demonstrates, the atmosphere changes abruptly in m. 39 when the singer begins discussing the problems in her relationship. She reveals that she has to "work, scrub, cook, clean," and do everything while her partner refuses to help, which makes her feel "tired and mean." Instead of showcasing the shimmering, higher register of her voice, the singer's vocal line shifts to middle- and lower-range notes as she reflects on these negative feelings. Her melody also has significantly less animated syncopation than the chorus. The

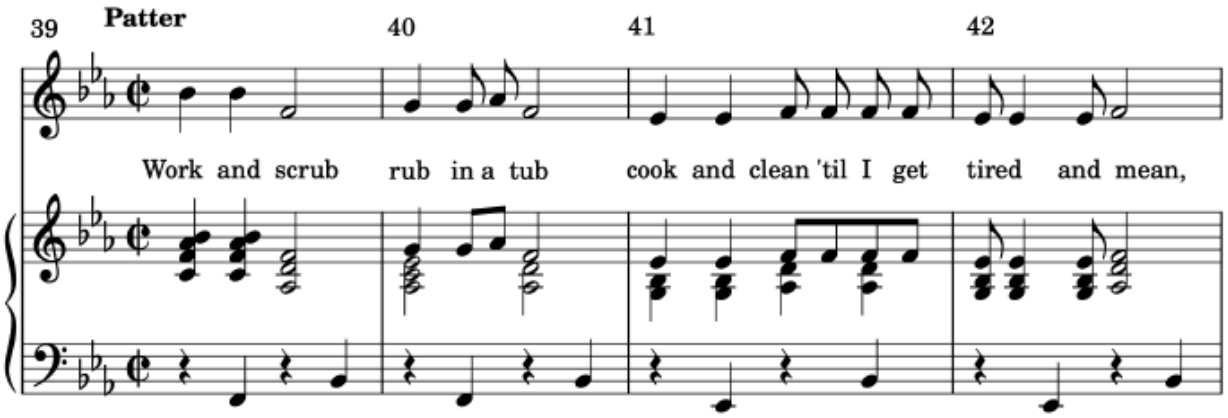
[148] Davis, 28–29

[149] Ibid, 18.

[150] Collins, 93.

accompaniment further emphasizes this dispirited mood by abandoning its melodic interludes for strict block chords with more predictable and repetitive chord progressions.

Musical Example 7: Margaret Bonds, "No Good Man" mm. 39–42[151]



The patter section reveals that the singer is unhappy with certain aspects of her relationship, but she does not strive to change them because she believes that her role is permanent. As Davis explains, the intersectional oppressions that plague Black women project an image of "female resignation and powerlessness" to discourage dissent.[152] As a result, instead of working towards autonomy the singer attempts to reconcile her partner's uncaring behavior with his other qualities. Also, the patter section goes by so quickly that she barely acknowledges the conflict before returning to the chorus, which she repeats three times in the song. The singer is desperately trying to avoid thinking about how unhappy she is in this relationship. On the surface she succeeds, but deep down she realizes that relentlessly looking on the bright side is not enough to change the flawed foundation of how her partner sees her and, consequently, how she sees herself.

Bonds and Hughes align with Black feminism by challenging systems that subjugate

[151] Margaret Bonds, "No Good Man," edited by John Michael Cooper, (John Michael Cooper, 2019), 5.

[152] Davis, 20.

Black women through a strategy Collins describes as "making [problems] visible."[153] As a Black man, Hughes did not shy away from confronting these issues—instead his text presents the haunting effects on Black relationships by putting them in plain sight. Bonds utilizes musical cues to depict how Black society has perpetuated intersectional oppression by relegating Black women to marginalized roles in unfulfilling relationships and projecting those images as the model of domesticity. This song represents the unsettling reality of the mistreatment that Black communities expect Black women to endure in romantic relationships. The singer's situation may be troubling, but it is not unique, and by telling this story Bonds represents many other Black women who have sacrificed their happiness to uphold a false image of a satisfying domestic life. "No Good Man" presents a bleak message in an appealing package to demonstrate some ugly truths about Black society, while recognizing the Black women who suffer the consequences.

Conclusion

> *Dear Leontyne,*
>
> *Recently, Langston Hughes sent me a program which he had received from Fisk University. Imagine how thrilled and surprised I was to find listed four of my spirituals.*
>
> *Performances are very important to me these days. Some time ago after the third try I was elected to membership in ASCAP [the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers] in what is termed "non-participating membership." On March 22nd of this year I was elected to full participation. Tuesday I attended my first ASCAP meeting. I told Dr. Clarence White to stay close to me, for I didn't know what the impact might do to me. I observed that there were few women present, and that I was the sole woman of color. I know of three other colored women who are members --- Florence Price, deceased ---- and the other two are not in*

[153] Collins, 159.

> *the concert field. This makes me feel a grave responsibility, so you know how happy I must feel to know that you are using my songs.*[154]
>
> —Excerpt from Margaret Bonds Letter to Leontyne Price
> October 31, 1955

Throughout her career, Bonds was mindful of her ultimate goal: uplifting Black communities by combining artistry and activism. Her letter to Leontyne Price demonstrates how Bonds fought for her place in esteemed organizations, such as the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), as part of her "grave responsibility" of representing Black women.[155] Although Bonds (like other Black composers) was originally barred from ASCAP, she eventually became a celebrated member. In fact, the 1967 article "Honors for Members" in *ASCAP Today* recognized her achievement for winning the Alumni Merit Award from Northwestern that same year.[156] Bonds utilized her place in this organization as yet another tool to support her mission of promoting the extraordinary success and talent within the Black artistic community nationwide.

Ultimately, Bonds dedicated herself to serving a more inclusive version of racial uplift that corresponds with Black feminist thought. She created Black feminist networks of support through her relationships with several Black artists, including her collaboration with soprano, Leontyne Price and her longstanding partnership with Langston Hughes, to create "safe spaces" that allowed Black female artists to thrive.[157] These relationships also formed a solid foundation

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[154] Margaret Bonds, "Letter from Margaret Bonds to Leontyne Price, dated October 31, 1955," "Margaret Bonds: Composer and Activist." Leo Robin Gallery. Georgetown University Library. August 29, 2016–January 24, 2017. Accessed on March 23, 2020. https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/margaret-bonds-composer-and-activist.

[155] Ibid.

[156] "Article in *ASCAP Today* (1967) highlighting the recent achievements of its various members, including Margaret Bonds," "Margaret Bonds: Composer and Activist." https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/margaret-bonds-composer-and-activist.

[157] Collins, 101.

of allies to help Bonds portray Black women's experiences in her songs. By exploring the struggles and triumphs of Black womanhood, Bonds and Hughes highlighted the resilience of Black women in spite of intersectional oppression and depicted the essential role that these women play in serving their communities by learning to uplift themselves.

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